

僕はやっぱ 手づがない3

望公太

NOZOMI KOTA

イラスト タカツキイチ



I Really Don't Notice

vol.3

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第一章 栗栖＝クリムゾン＝紅莉亜の場合

“Kyaan!? (W-what!?)”



“You got that!? Make a sound and you’re seriously dead!”



“(W-wait a second! W-w-what do you think you’re trying to dooo…?)”

第四章 織野栞の場合

「なにななに言ってるのよ！」

へへ変態っ！」

“W-w-w-what are you saying!? Y-you pervert!”

Prologue

When I was small, really small.

It was far before I met the lady in the strange suit at Gentle Breeze Park.

I think I was three or four.

I went on an adventure.

And ten minutes after my adventure began, I was lost...

“... W-waaaah.”

Through the influence of some anime or something I’d seen at the time, the desire for adventure welling up in my couldn’t be quelled; I stole from my parents’ eyes and snuck out of the house. But my heart full of dreams and hope, in a mere ten minutes, had turned all to regret

The young me lost his way, he burst into tears...

“... Uuuu... mom, dad, where are...”

Where? ... Well, I went and left on my own, so I mean, my parents were probably at home, but back then I was only able to wail, waiting for someone to come save me.

The gradually darkening sky further stimulated my anxiety. Teeter, totter, I walked aimlessly, and by the time I noticed it, I was standing before the torii gate of a run-down shrine.

It was at the moment.

“Two years, two hundred eighty-seven days, twenty-two hours, fourteen minutes until Kagoshima Akira meets the Cage of Death Remnant. I guess this is around the right place. If I come into contact with him when he’s any younger, there’s a high probability his meeting with me won’t remain in memory. But it’s not good for this meeting to become more impactful than his meeting with the Cage of Death Remnant. To protect that unstable line, and become a ‘friend who presence is only natural’... yeah. Now really is best.”

A quiet, clear and gentle voice.

When I looked again, there was a kid around my age before me.

Gray hair close to white, a gray kinagashi close to black.

“Pleasure to meet you.”

He said to me with a bittersweet smile on his face.

“... Who are... you...? What are you?”

“Who and what am I, huh... fufu. That’s what I’d like to know.”

He gave a smile to evade the question.

“My name is... right. World of death... how does Shinose Kai sound?”

“Kai... kun?”

“No need for honorifics. I’m just going to call you Akira.”

“... Why do you know my name?”

Distrust was born in my chest.

Could it be this boy approached me with some objective in mind? Had he investigated me in advance? The young me was cautious for his age, he began suspecting the boy.

“I mean, it’s written on your clothes.”

He said with a sarcastic smile.

... At the time, I was wearing the T-shirt mom worked through the night to make, a T-shirt embroidered with ‘Akira’ in large letters.

“That’s a cool shirt.”

“I know, right!? Mom made it for me!”

... At the time, I seriously thought it was cool, and gladly wore it.

Ah, how embarrassing.

After that, Kai led the lost me all the way to my house.

“Hey, Akira.”

Kai said as he got ready to leave.

“Do you want to become friends with me?”

He had helped me out when I was lost, and praised my Akira shirt, so I already liked this Kai fellow a whole bunch.

“Okay!”

I replied, full of energy.

“Thank you, Akira. Then we’re friends from today.”

“Yeah. Best friends! We’re best friends!”

Ah...

I remembered it, Kai.

That’s how we became friends, isn’t it?

The first friend I ever made in my life... was Kai.

Chapter 1: Kagoshima Akira's Daily Life— With Kurisu Crimson Kuria

'Ah, Orino-senpai. Good day.'

'Same to you, Kurisu-chan.'

'Are you the only one here today?'

'Yeah. Ah, but Kagoshima-kun's bag is here, so he's probably somewhere around. His bag was already there when I got here, so maybe he went to the bathroom?'

'Is that so.'

'... Hm? Kurisu-chan, what's that shady-looking bottle in your hand?'

'Oh, this is a magic potion that was delivered from a friend over there.'

'... It kinda really looks like the sort of thing a witch would make. It's smoking.'

'Ahaha... you're right about that. She sent over this troublesome concoction tacked onto the items I asked her for... I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be harassment, and she carefully aimed for the time I was in school so I couldn't dispose of it...'

'... It's from a friend... right?'

'A kid with a dubious character... s-she's not a bad kid deep down... probably.'

'Well, as long as you're fine with it, nothing I can do.'

'This is quite a dangerous potion, so I plan to take it home and safely dispose of it today.'

"I see. In that case, you'd better carry it carefully so you don't spill it."

"Quite right. To make sure I don't spill a single drop, I have to take care an—
gyan!"

"Kurisu-chaaaaan!"

When I was drinking juice in the club room, I accidentally spilled some around the entrance, so I headed to the bathroom to fetch some toilet paper to clean it up.

I was now on the way back, jogging towards the ComClub room.

I wouldn't want someone to slip and fall over, so I've got to hurry.

By the way, the ComClub is officially termed the Computer Club. While it was originally a club that diligently carried out its activities, after many a twist and turn, the club room was only occasionally used to hold study sessions for its only five members.

When I put my hand on the entrance door, I suddenly stopped in my tracks.

"... It's kinda boisterous in there."

Did someone come while I was out getting paper? I suspected as I opened the door.

"Ah... K-Kagoshima-kun."

Inside-with a dumbfounded expression on her face-was Orino-san—

"An! Kyankyan!"

And a dog.

Why was there a dog in the club room? It was a small-bred. Fluffy tufts of hair poofed up from its body. What lovable large eyes. Its breed was... Pomeranian, perhaps?

Why is there a dog here?

"Orino-san, what's up with the dog?"

"Dog!? U-umm... uh, a friend asked me to look after it for a bit..."

"Hmm."

"Ku~un (Orino-senpai...)"

Letting out a somewhat sorrowful yelp, the dog in the classroom walked over to Orino-san's feet.

"An... ann (So I became a dog...)"

"... Oh no, I can't understand a word you're saying, but you'll be fine, Kurisu-chan...?"

They conversed with expression beyond troubled, the dog and Orino-san.

"... Kurisu-chan? Orino-san, did you just say Kurisu-chan?"

"Ah, no, that's... um, it's also the dog's name. Chris, you know."

"Hmm, I see. So it just happened to have the same name as Kurisu-chan."

“T-that’s right, pure coincidence!”

Well, Chris was a common enough name, so I’m sure there’d be some overlap eventually. I gazed at the dog—Chris once more. Yep. Maybe his atmosphere does kinda resemble Kurisu-chan. Especially that small size, and the way he tickles my urge to protect.

Is it rude to think that Kurisu-chan resembles a dog?

“Ah, that’s right. I forgot.”

I remembered the juice I’d spilled, and began using the paper to wipe up the floor around the entrance.

“I spilled juice here a moment ago. But thankfully, it looks like I managed to clean it up before someone took a tumble.”

“” ... ””

From my back, I thought I felt two piercing gazes of, so it was you, but, well, that must be my imagination.

“Anyways, Orino-san.”

I said as I tossed the toilet paper in the bin.

“Did Kurisu-chan come around today?”

“Eh!? W-why do you ask?”

“Her bag’s right over there.”

The bag Kurisu-chan usually used was placed on the floor. No, rather than placed, it felt more like it was left behind.

“And also...”

I shifted my eyes to where the dog Chris had been up to a moment ago.

“... What’s on the ground over there is Kurisu-chan’s uniform, isn’t it?”

In a state where the term shed off would be most accurate, there was a female Adatara High School uniform. A quick glance wasn’t enough for me to determine whose it was, but the ribbons Kurisu-chan usually wore were fallen alongside it, so there was no mistaking it belonged to her. The size also looked on the smaller side.

Now then. Why was it littered in a place like this?

“... Mnn?”

On inspection of the uniform, I discovered something incredible. In the gaps between the garment that emphasized the color white, the slightest glimpse of pink fabric... Umm, wait a second. Isn't that a bra and panties?

“Kyan kyan kyan! (Waaaaaaaah!)”

Chris made a mad dash, leaping at Kurisu-chan's uniform, using her small body to conceal the undergarments from my view.

“Ah, you shouldn't do that, Chris. That's not a toy.”

I hurriedly moved to recover Kurisu-chan's uniform and undergarments, but,

“I-it's fine!”

I was stopped by Orino-san.

“Right now Chris is just desperate to hid—I mean, desperate to play!”

“... But if you leave her there, Kurisu-chan's uniform is going to stink of dog.”

“I-i-it's fine! Umm... I-look, Kurisu-chan usually smells a bit like dog anyways.”

“How cruel!”

It was toxicity unfit for Orino-san's mouth. Could it be that she doesn't actually get along with Kurisu-chan very well? I started contemplating the theory.

“Um, you see. The truth is, I just instructed Chris to put away the bag and uniform.”

“What? Oh no, no, Orino-san. There's no way a dog can—he did it!”

I turned around to surprise. Chris's dexterous mouth opened the bag's fastener, and using his forepaws, he skillfully folded and tucked the uniform away. What's more, the work was all done at an astounding speed. As if the dog was hurrying so as not to let me see the undergarments. Amazing. This dog has been trained to perfection.

“So Orino-san. In the end, why was Kurisu-chan's uniform here...?”

What's more, just what sort of situation would have even her underwear mixed in with it?

“U-umm, umm...”

Orino-san looked extremely troubled. After thinking to herself a while, she spoke in a half resigned voice as if to say, it’s no good, this is all I can think of.

“T-that’s... because Kurisu-chan raised a cry of war and ran off naked somewhere...”

“Naked, screaming out!?”

What is that girl doing!?

Did she finally reach the end of the rope!?

“Kyan! (Orino-senpai!)”

The dog that had finished stuffing the uniform in the bag voiced a vehement objection to Orino-san’s statement—or at least barked with such momentum.

“Kyan kyan! (Can’t you cover it up just a bit more sensibly!?)”

“I-I’m sorry... Kurisu-chan, I can’t think of anything else...”

“Gyan! (Even if I begrudgingly accept the naked part as an inevitability, the warcry part was completely unnecessary, wasn’t it!?)”

Chris’ energetic barks, and Orino-san who stroked his head to soothe him. I’m sure she was praising him for putting the uniform away so neatly. Praise them when they do a good thing, it’s the same for humans and dogs.

“No, but Orino-san... no matter how you look at it, it’s impossible to think she ran off somewhere naked...”

“Kuun (Look at that, Orino-senpai. That really was pushing it...)”

“Kagoshima-kun. Think about it, this is Kurisu-chan we’re talking about.”

“Oh, you’re right. It is Kurisu-chan after all.”

“An!? (Eeh!?)”

Anyone else aside, wouldn’t it be plausible for Kurisu-chan? She’s got a tough enough heart to loiter around town in cosplay on a daily basis. Personally, I’m just praying she doesn’t get taken in by the police.

“Kuun... (What sort of person do you take me for...)”

Chris raised a dispirited cry, curling up into a ball in the corner of the room. I wonder what happened. Could it be that he’s fearful of a new face, meaning

me?

In that case, I've got to take initiative to open up his heart. I've got to teach this dog that I'm not a scary person. I slowly approached Chris—and lifted him into an embrace from behind.

“Good boy, good boy, who’s a good boy, whooo’s a good boy, yes you are, yees you are!”

“Kyaun!!?”

I held him to my chest and started nuzzling my cheek against him.

I felt like the true Matsugoro-san.

Even so, this dog sure is cute.

“There, there, there, there, there!”

“Kyan!? Kyankyaaan! (Woah! What are you doing, all of a sudden!?)”

Chris began thrashing around in my hands.

Yeah, yeah. Looks like he likes it. Okay, then some more skinship!

“There there there there there there there!”

“Anan! (No...oo, hahaha. T-that tickles, Kagoshima-senpai!)

“Theretheretheretheretheretheretheretherethere!”

“Awu...n-n! (Ah, n-no, that’s... not there!)”

Right. I'm sure his heart's pretty open to me at this point.

Now this is the cincher.

“Mm—”

I approached with a kiss.

“Kyan!? (W-what!?)”

Chris started letting out panicked yelps.

“Y-you can’t!”

And Orino-san sent me flying with both hands. Eh? What?

“Ww-w-what do you think you’re doing, Kagoshima-kun!”

“Whaat... just some skinship to get along better with Chris...”

“That’s what the world calls sexual harassment!”

Eeh? No way, even if you tell me I'm sexually harassing a dog...
I think kissing an animal is actually relatively normal.
As I'd fallen to the floor, I raised my body while staring at Chris. Heh, heh, his breath was rough, and while I didn't quite get it, it somewhat looked to me that he was making a troubled expression.

"Uummm, sorry Chris. I didn't mean any harm."
"A-an... (No, that's umm, it's not like I hated it... it's just, it was so sudden, you surprised me... au...)"

He fidgeted with his forepaws and covered his face on the spot. There Orino-san came, took Chris into her arms with a hup, and went back to her seat. Hah, she let out a tired sigh.

"Kurusu-cha—I mean Chris. What do we do about this situation?"

She spoke to the dog at her chest.

"... Kuuun (... If you leave it be, the potion's effect will eventually wear out and I think I'll return to normal, but... I really don't know how long that'll take)"

"... Yeah."

"An! (But don't worry! Just in case something like this happened, I've properly mastered the mixing of antidotes!)"

"Yeah, I see."

"An an an an an! (It's just, I won't be able to make an antidote in this form..... So Orino-senpai, and you have my humblest apologies, but could you please help me out? I'd be extremely thankful if you could go and buy the items I list out!)"

"Yeah!"

Orino-san gave a big nod, and with a gentle smile, she stroked Chris' head.

"... I'm sorry, I have absolutely no idea what you're saying."

"... Kun (As I thought)."

Chris limply buried his head into Orino-san's chest. By the way, in this scenario, I don't mean it metaphorically, I mean he was literally buried. The reason being... Orino-san's chest was such to create such a state.

"....."

For a moment, despair ran through Chris' eyes. The eyes of a human who had been shown an absolute, insurmountable difference. And—
With a boing, Chris started swatting at Orino-san's bust with his forepaws.

“Kyah! W-wait, Kurisu-chan!?”

Orino-san's opposition rang in futility, Chris continued her bouncing stream of dog punches at the mound.
Oh my, they're really shaking.

“... An... An (... I turned into a dog, he thinks I ran off somewhere naked screaming... and I've got no tits...)”

His attitude as if to say, when I'm just, when I'm just... Chris clad himself in a negative atmosphere as his punches grew more streamlined and sophisticated. One, two, the divide between his left and right paw motion was distinct. Yet such splendid jabs and straights were all but nullified before nature's shock mitigators.

... Man, that dog throws some nice punches, in various ways. An eyeful, really.

“Ah! I see! So this is a pure bred boxer!”

“Kagoshima-kun! No time for boring jokes, please take Chris!”

... She called it boring.

I fell into a slump with my greatest gag missing the mark, but it did seem dangerous to let a mad dog loose for any longer, so I accepted the small package from Orino-san.

“Seriously...” Orino-san muttered, as she embraced her body with both hands to guard it. Her cheeks were a little red, her breath a little out of order.

... Personally, you have my gratitude, little doggy. I wanted to commend him for his service, but since I was in front of Orino-san, I was better off giving a proper scolding.

“Hey, you can't do that, Chris. No attacking a girl's breasts.”

“... A-an (... Urk. I-I'm sorry. When Orino-senpai held me to her chest, a great burden was placed on my soul...)”

“And also, since it was Orino-san's chest, the damage you dealt may have been small, but if you hit a hard, flat chest like my underclassman Kurisu-chan's, then I'm sure she wouldn't get off lightly.”

[IMAGE]

“.....”

Chris fell into a depression in my arms. He lost every last bit of spirit in his body.

I wonder why. I can't say there was any mistake in my utterance, meaning the way I was holding him must be wrong.

Umm, I think the proper way to hold cats is by the scruff of their neck, but what were you supposed to do to dogs... ah, right, that's right. I remember.

I firmly cupped a hand under Chris' small behind, and strongly embraced his chest. His felt was superb, so I ended up stroking his bottom.

“Oh, a nice bottom on this one.”

Orino-san struck me, Chris bit me.

... Why?

When I was a wee lad, I always wanted a dog. That was quite likely the 'want to keep a pet disease' everyone catches in their life. I'm sure everyone's gone begging to their parents for a pet at least once before. I was no exception, and I begged and pleaded for a dog.

But, “It's going to cost money, and it's plain to see that you're mother's going to be the one looking after it, so no!” was the commonplace, cliché, yet critically correct reason the proposal was rejected.

“But _____-kun's place has one!” I hung on, but mom activated the sure-kill, “If you like _____-kun's place so much, then go join his family!” bringing unto me an absolute defeat.

I'll admit, that urge to keep a dog was a passing phase. Even so, in the depths of my heart, it left a slight, faint residual effect.

That's why.

Looking after Chris raised my tensions ever-so-slightly.

“What's this?”

Under the evening sky, as we walked one man and one pup, I spotted a certain individual by the school gate. Chris was currently snug in my bicycle basket.

After that, Orino-san said, “I can’t take dogs anywhere near my place... and I have things I need to attend to tonight...” and Chris came under my care. In that case, I had to wonder why he was even left with her in the first place, but that didn’t really matter. Even if it was for only one night, I was happy I could look after a dog.

“Isn’t that Kikyouin-san?”

Under the sakura tree out behind the gym (not currently in bloom,), was Kikyouin-san. A blond ponytail, and slightly harsh eyes. That was undoubtedly my classmate, and club compatriot.

“Heey, Kikyouin-san!”

I loudly called her name and waved my hand.

When she noticed me, she made an unpleasant face, retrieved the bag at her feet, and walked off in the complete opposite direction from me.

“.....”

I hung my head.

As one might infer, I wasn’t very liked by Kikyouin-san. Rather than hated, perhaps it was more accurate to say she didn’t like to deal with me.

“An (Kikyouin-senpai’s the same as ever...)”

Chris in the basket let out a small cry.

“An an (It’s not like she actually hates him that much).”

A sight that said, good grief, leaked from the gap between his fangs. That attitude was almost like that of a reliable older sister.

It was a shocking scene.

This must be what it means to doubt one’s own eyes.

It happened along the way, as I was walking Chris towards my house.

“Glasses, glasses...”

I spotted a young boy searching for his glasses.

His knees on the asphalt, he was restlessly looking over the area. Age-wise, he

looked a little younger than me. In middle school, perhaps.

Mind you, it would be perfectly fine if he was just searching for his glasses. If that was all, it would be a commonplace sight. The thing that really shocked me? It was none other than the pair of glasses resting atop the boy's head.

“.....”

Amazing.

It's the first time I've seen it in real life, someone searching for glasses, forgetting they put them on their head. My heart was a little moved. Chris was also opening his eyes wide in surprise.

“Umm, your glasses are on your head.”

“Come again? Oh.”

When I spoke up out of kindness, he put a hand on his head and noticed the existence of his glasses.

“So that's where they were”

Returning the spectacles to their proper position, he stood in a flash. He must not have hit his growth spurt yet, he was short in stature, with plenty of youthful features left on his face. He wore a white shirt and slacks. With black suspenders over that.

This is just my personal opinion, but I think suspenders are an item reserved solely for advanced practitioners of the way of fashion. A majority of the common rabble exists only to self-destruct, never truly pulling them off, but the boy before my eyes fit his suspenders quite well.

“Thank you.”

When he noticed the far-too-interesting hiding spot of his glasses, I thought he would be at least a bit embarrassed, but without showing any particular signs, he made an amicable smile and promptly gave his thanks.

“I was on the verge of taking a journey of three thousand kilometers in search of these bad boys. You really saved me there. Thank you, truly.”

He said as he held out his hand for a handshake. What a friendly young boy.

“The pleasure's all mine. Well, I didn't do anything significant.”

So I shook his hand. Without thinking deep into it, I reflexively gripped his hand.

I... touched him.

“To meet a person as kind as you, I really am a happy camper.”

He gave a warm smile. It was quite adorable, and a truly childish smile. How should I put it, this boy gave off a childish feel overall. Middle school was the age where one was supposed to force themselves to act like an adult, but that was definitely not the case with him.

“Ah, come to think of it, I was in a hurry.”

If you’ll pardon me, or so he swiftly, one-sidedly finished our parting and left quick on his feet.

“... What a peculiar kid.”

Feeling something hazy, I got back to pushing my bicycle.



“Sorry to keep you waiting, Kugayama-san.”

“... Was that really the best you could think of?”

“Shucks, I always wanted to try it out once, that glasses, glasses thing. As a fellow glasses wearer, you understand how I feel, don’t you?”

“Like hell I do.”

“Whatever the case, with this, I’ve properly ‘remembered’ Kagoshima Akira. No matter where he goes, I’ll be able to grasp it as if it’s in the palm of my hand.”

“I see. But you’ve got strange taste, you know that. What do you think looking into a civilian brat is going to accomplish?”

“Just in case, you know. I’ve been curious about him a while now. What sort of man is Orino-san’s favorite, see.”

“... Hmph. How idiotic.”

“And you’re in a bad mood as ever. Could it be you’re still angry at being teamed up with Orino-san? Well, when I heard you were going to be paired up with that chest, I had to wonder what sort of harassment is this, but I don’t think it’s anything you have to worry about.”

“...”

“When you wear the Drive Suit, it shows off all the lines of your body, after all.

You're not particularly small, Kugayama-san, it's just when you line up with Orino-san... huh? What's wrong, Kugayama-san? It's a waste to bite your cigarette down the middle."

"... Grit your teeth."

"Huh? Did I make you mad? Then I apologize. I'm sorry."

"... Tsk. Apology don't work after you prattle on like that. Making the same irritating smile as ever. I Can't stand it."

"Is that so? But I find the smile you show from time to time to be irresistible."

"..."

"Oh? Are you blushing? You really are weak to complements, Kugayama-san."

"... Die."

"Ahaha. I'm sorry. I'll be careful from here on."

"... You've got to wonder what's going on when a pipsqueak like you's rank S."

"That just because I'm a genius, that's all there is to it."

"..... I'm going. I'm keeping Orino waiting."

"Come to think of it, you had a job, did you? Good luck with that."

"And what about you?"

"I'll do whatever I want. As we've discussed, I think I'll be taking some independent action. .So take that how you will."

"... Don't do anything too crazy, Saijou."

"Yeah, yeah."



On the road home of man and dog, I recalled Kurisu-chan. I was unexpectedly having Chris stay the night, but when you thought about it, this would be the second time a biologically female lifeform was sleeping over. (Chris was actually a Christina. On the way back, I lifted her up by the shoulders and examined her crotch to confirm it. At that time, for some reason, Chris shied back like a maiden seen naked by the opposite sex for the first time in her life—or at least moved that way)

The first—girl who slept over at my house was Kurisu-chan.

Kurisu Crimson Kuria.

Half Japanese and half something, she was a cute girl who unfortunately suffered from eight grade syndrome.

“Eh? The name of our world?”

I asked once upon a time.

About Kurisu-cha’s bible, ‘Kuriah’s Grand adventure’.

“No, no, I’m not talking about your world. Your world’s this one, ain’t it. What’chu talkin’ ‘bout?”

“S-sorry.”

“I’m asking about the world of ‘Kuriah’s Grand Adventure’. The world where magic naturally exists. What’s it called? Otherworld works generally give their world a name as part of the plot setting.”

“It doesn’t have one. We just normally describe them as this world and that world. I mean, you don’t normally tack a name onto a world, do you?”

“... I guess.”

The world’s the world, and nothing beyond that.

No, in the first place... what is a world?

For example, even if there was a world out there apart from this one, the word world is meant to refer to entirety of what humanity inhabits, so wouldn’t other human ‘worlds’ also be included in that definition—no, apart from that completely different world in question, there’s also the possibility of parallel worlds existing, so..... yeah? Yeaah?

“K-Kagoshima-senpai! Are you alright? Your eyes are spinning!”

My body was shook to its senses. That was dangerous. I ended up thinking something beyond the capacity of my brain.

“Then is it that? The reason anime and manga that take place in other worlds give names to the worlds themselves is just to make it easier to understand for the people watching?”

“Right. I think that way makes it easier to understand, and forms the image in your head that this is a different world.”

“I see. Then Kuriah’s Grand Adventure follows the pattern of events happening on a planet very similar to earth.”

“... I’m not sure what to think about calling it a pattern... but that’s right.

Naturally, the planet has a name. The planet ‘Welness’ is my—the stage of Kuriah’s Grand Adventure.”

“I see, I see.”

“Ah, but while I said we call it here and there, it does have a name on paper. Though no one ever uses the terms in standard conversation.”

This world here without magic—the ‘none-world’.
That world there with plenty of it—the ‘with-world’.
Or so Kurisu-chan explained.

“It’s inconvenient without a distinction, so it’s just a term for convenience’ sake.”

“... Mn? Huh? But if the names of both worlds were given by the people in the magic world, does that mean the people of that alternate world know about this one?”

“Yes. A few hundred years ago—in what this world calls the middle ages, the Gate that connected the with-world and none-world was discovered. Born through coincidence, the research of that first Gate—often called a disaster—made it possible to transfer between worlds...”

After saying that much, Kurisu-chan held her words a bit. An unfitting shadow spread across her youthful face.

“... And what awaited the magicians who came ‘here’ was—the witch hunts.”
“.....”

Witch hunts.
That term was definitely one I saw documented in world history. I don’t know the specifics, but I at least knew acts that would be considered inhumane in modern Japanese society were committed.
Kurisu-chan suddenly went silent. Unable to withstand the silence that went as far as being painful,

“B-but you know, why did that ‘Gate’ suddenly appear, I wonder!”

I hurriedly asked. I wasn’t particularly curious about it, but no matter what it was, I needed something to change the mood.

“Eh?”

“No, I mean, that Gate was discovered a few hundred years ago, right? Based on what you’ve told me, it seems that Gate ended up linking two worlds that were unaware of one another’s existence, but what caused it to appear?”

“That’s... unknown. It’s still being researched. Something about the mana leaking from two parallel planets building and bursting, or the forbidden research of some dark guild going out of control, and putting a strain on space itself, there are various theories.”

“Hmmm.”

“Whatever the case, it all happened before I was born, so I’m not that knowledgeable...”

“Before you were born? Ah, that’s right. You said Kuria’s Grand Adventure was completed before you were born. I guess that’s what you meant.”

“Eh... ah, that’s right! That’s totally what I meant!”

Well,

Kuria’s Grand adventure was one of those so-called otherworld summon-type fantasies, so perhaps it was uncouth to ask, “why is it possible to go between worlds”?

I mean... if you can’t do that, the story isn’t going to start.

If it’s a manga, it’s fine just like that. Just a manga—

Oh.

As I was reminiscing about Kurisu-chan, dog Chris and I finally reached my humble abode.

“I’m home.”

“An aan (Pardon my intrusion.)”

Expressing my return greetings (even if no one was home, it was just a force of habit) I set Chris down into the house, closing the door behind me to prevent her from running away.

“I’ll be looking after you tonight, Chris.”

“An (Yes. I’ll be in your care).”

Giving an energetic response—or at least a bark that sounded like it, Chris followed step by step to my side. I made her stay in the living room momentarily, as I headed to my room and changed into loungewear (A T-shirt and shorts). When I returned to the living room, Chris was sitting around bored and aimlessly. Is this what it feels like to look after someone’s cat? Though she’s a dog.

“An (Kagoshima-senpai).”

When she noticed me, Chris sauntered over to my feet.

“An an an (Umm, I really am thankful that you let me stay over. I can’t use any magic in this state... and because of that, it doesn’t look like I can return home, you really are a lifesaver.)”

She lowered her head as if giving me a bow. You can’t understand my words, but I have to give my gratitude, it was a gesture that made me feel such a strong sense of responsibility.

When I lowered myself onto the sofa, Chris came up right next to me and plopped right down again.

What a docile dog.

“Yeah. Is she still nervous? Chris, you can hang loose and run around a bit more, you know.”

“An...(No... as a human being, I have a bit of resistance to running around in this form...)”

“Yeah. I see. That’s right, since you’re here, you want to play with me, don’t you.”

“.....”

I got the feeling she sent me a glance to say, are you sure you’re not the one who wants to play, but I’m sure it was my imagination. Of course Chris wants to play with me!

I stood and took out the ball I’d brought down from my room.

My parents wouldn’t let me have a dog, but instead, they bought me a ball for a dog.

... Thinking back on it now, it was incomprehensible just what part of that was supposed to be a replacement, but the old me was a good kid who could put up with that. Would you call that a stupid kit? I was always playing one-man-two-part (me role, dog role) games with the ball after all...

Well, that doesn’t matter.

The ball I never thought I’d use was fully applicable today!

That’s right! We’re going to play!

I’m going to play it up with this pup!

“Lookie here, Chris. Go get it!”

I threw it like a baseball.

Crash!

“.....”

“.....”

A vase smashed.

“.....”

“.....”

... I went and did it. I really did it.

Why did I throw it overhand...

Why did I give it a windup before I tossed it...

Chris beside me gave me a pitying look that asked, is this person alright? Stop it, don't look at me like that. You're making me want to die.

Hah...

This is kinda, just a real damper.

“... Yeah. Let's just say Chris broke it.”

“Kyan!?”

Well, the flower vase that broke was my personal property, so it wasn't a big problem. To be more precise, it wasn't a vase but an urn. A hundred-yen urn I was sold by a certain swindler. I didn't have any way to use it, so I put it to use as a vase.

Honestly, I didn't really care that it broke. Kikyouin-san also said, “That urn's already completely lost its effect” or something.

“So let's get ourselves back together. Take 2.”

After cleaning up the urn fragments, I got back to playing ball with Chris.

“Hey Chris, go get it.”

Learning from my previous mistake, this time I threw it underhand.
Chris rushed over to the rolling ball, bit down on it and came back.

“That’s a good girl, good girl. You did it, Chris.”
“An... (This is more humiliating than I expected...)”
“Now here we go again.”
“Auu (Ah, as I thought)”

She raised a cry of lament as she ran.
After that, I repeated the game around another five times.
It looked to me like Chris was energetically enjoying the ball game, but for some reason, that liveliness seemed like a huge lie.

“Hey, Chris. Could it be you don’t actually enjoy this game?”
As pointless as it seemed, I tried asking Chris at my feet.
“An... (Honestly, not really... Just what part of chasing after balls do dogs find fun...)”

Yeah, she looks a little down.
“Don’t tell me she’s sick...”
“!?”

Chris’ spirit suddenly returned.
An an, she barked as she bounded around me. “Hurry up and throw the ball”
her eyes pleaded.

“... No, this is really shady.”
“Kyan!? (Eeh!?)”

What else am I supposed to do, she breathed as if to say.
“A dog’s energy meter... is the tail. Yep.”

I directed my attention to her tail. That short fluffy tail was hung limply. That lack of motion really must mean she’s not feeling very well.

“An... an!? (The tail... the tail!?)”
She suddenly turned around.

“A-an... aaan (Huh...? How are you supposed to move a tail... I thought I was

pulling it off a while ago, but... huuh?)”

Letting out a voice as if she would burst into tears at any moment, she began spinning in circles chasing after her tail. It was a truly, laughable, heartwarming sight to behold.

Aim for the Ouroboros, I felt like cheering her on.

As I looked at Chris, I suddenly recalled a story about the centipede I heard from my childhood friend Kai. The centipede required complex coordination to manipulate its countless legs to send itself forward, but one day, the moment someone asked it how it walked, it suddenly troublesomely forgot how it had ever walked at all.

That was that sort of air the current Chris was giving off.

“A-an~~ (M-mooooove~~~~. Hnggg~~~~)”

Her body was beginning to quiver, she shook like a newly born foal.

“Aaan~~ (Hngg~~. Hnnngg~~. Do it, you can do it, my tail~~).”

She shut her eyes tight, bracing her legs with all her might. As if she was gathering every nerve in her body to her backside—wait, no!

“Hey, Chris! You can’t do that, no crapping on the carpet!”

“An!”

I ate a solid body blow.

What’s up with this dog...

After we played, the meal came next.

There’s a Japanese proverb that says those who don’t work don’t eat, but those positioned as exceptions to that rule are the pets kept by man. Without doing any work, a pet will receive food every day at a definite time. They didn’t have to scavenge for food like their wild brethren.

At a glance, you might think it an extraordinarily envious life, but is that truly such a joyous thing? Instead of being kept by humans, would animals be happier living as their wild selves in nature—or so is the opinion I often see, and every time I think.

Nay, that opinion itself is the conceit of man.

That is a thought process that separates humankind as a complete separate line from all other forms of life, forgetting that human himself is no more than a portion of nature.

What harm is there in pets or zoos?

If you think of it as a new form of symbiosis, it isn't the least be unnatural. For example, compare a lion racing across the great plains of the savanna, constantly hunting with its life on the line, and the sleepy-looking lion you see in a zoo. If asked which one was happier, a great many people would say the former.

But is that really true.

Hasn't humankind simply convinced himself of that?

Don't humans—simply want to believe in their pretentious idyllic image of what should be?

“And so, Chris. I can see that the remaining vestiges of your wild pride are preventing you from receiving this grace from me, but you don't have to worry about that, you know.”

I spoke in an admonishing tone. But Chris wouldn't even touch the food I put out.

“Ann... (You're wrong, you're wrong Kagoshima-senpai... That's not the problem here...)”

Her round and cute eyes took in the heaping serving of dog food laid out over the small bowl.

“An an (No matter how you cut it, eating this is... a bit...)”
“... Yeah. This is trouble.”

Once we had finished playing ball, I thought it was about time for her to get hungry, so I presented Chris with the dog food I bought at the convenience store.

Chris simply gazed absentmindedly at the dish.

Wanting her to eat it, I prattled out some arbitrary on-the-spot philosophy, but it had absolutely no effect. It's not like my words got through in the first place.

“Kuun... (Kagoshima-senpai... you have my humblest apologies, but this alone is... I don't have the courage to eat a meal fit for a dog...)”

Without even tasting the food before her, Chris sat down, sending me eyes that seemed to plead for forgiveness.

“I see... that’s a shame. It looks like the dog food’s not to your tastes. Do you usually eat something higher class?”

“Auu...”

“I splurged and bought the most expensive one they were selling, but it looks like that wasn’t nearly enough... I’m sorry...”

“.....”

“... I, you know, I fell victim to a bit of a scam the other day... because of that, I’m a little short of money, it was quite a painful expenditure... I thought if it would make you happy... but I guess that doesn’t have anything to do with whether you actually eat it or not.”

“.....”

“I really am sorry...ahaha, getting all excited on my own, I’m an idiot. Yeah. If you don’t want to eat it, you don’t have to. I’ll eat this stuff on my own. It looks kinda like chocolate, I’m sure it’s sweet and delicious...”

When I held in tears, reaching a hand to the plate on the floor,

“... Hn, a-an! Ananan!”

Chris suddenly began chowing down on the dog food.
Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.

“W-what’s this, all of a sudden? You’re going to eat it after all?”

Without ever looking away, she devoted herself wholeheartedly to her meal. Oh, so she can eat it. I’m glad the money didn’t go to waste.

“How is it, Chris? Is it tasty?”

“A-an... (U-urgh... I never thought the day would come when I’d find myself eating dog food... I’m in a dog’s body, so I don’t think it’ll make me sick, but it tastes funny~~.)”

“Yep, yep. If you’re that happy about it, it just means I splurged in the right places.”

Chris polished off her plate with incredible force. While eating, it almost looked like tears were surfacing in her eyes, but well, I’m sure that’s my imagination.

“Oh. You finished it all off. There, there, good girl.”

“W-woof... (I-I have to get back to my original body fast...)”

“Then here’s a reward for such a good girl. Look, seconds.”

I filled up the empty bowl with dog food again.

“Gyan!?”

It was a cry of terror. No, a cry for joy, surely.

“An, an an! (I just can’t, Kagoshima-senpai! That last one was already too much. And you filled it even more than last time...)”

“Now, now, no need to hold back, just eat it all down.”

“.....”

“Huh? What’s wrong? Ah... could it be you’re already full? I see, I’m sorry. You were going at it like craze, so I just thought it wasn’t nearly enough...”

“.....”

“Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I can’t put what’s been poured back in the bag, so I’ll just do my best to eat it... I’m really sorry...”

“An aaan!”

Chris went at the food once more.

She was still hungry after all.

It’s just, when I tried describing to myself the sight of her happily eating her meal, for some reason the words, ‘desperation’ and ‘despair’ surfaced in my mind.

And it came without warning.

Her meal over, Chris lied limply as if she were dead, when suddenly she stood, and let her body shake.

“What’s wrong?”

Though I asked, Chris ignored me, suspiciously wandering around the area.

“A-au... (W-what do I do... I really can’t hold it in...)”

It was a yelp troubled as could be.

“Au... (T-the bathroom...)”

Walking unsteadily with uncertain feet, her rearpaws turned inwards.

“What’s wrong, Chris?”

When I asked again, she looked at me pleadingly.

“A... uu....”

“.....”

Ooh.

She’s kinda cute when she shakes like that.

Should I embrace her from behind and hold her tight?

“...!?”

Perhaps in answer to my gesture of opening and closing my arms, Chris began retreating with incredible speed (her toes still turned a little inward).

“A-aun (N-not right now... if you squeeze me now, I’ll leak...)”

Hmm, she looks like she hates it, so let’s give up. From there, with the steps of a traveler in a desert searching for their oasis, she started wandering around my house. Her movements were so close to a desert wanderer, I thought she might want water, but when I filled up a bowl and held it out, “Kyan! (Wrong!)” she sent me a threatening bark.

And,

“A-an...”

Letting out a bark mingled with relief and delight, Chris left the living room, walked a little down the hall—and arrived at my house’s bathroom.

“An... (Thank god... I made it in time...)”

Under my watch, Chris pressed her forepaw against the toilet door, dexterously standing on two legs. Her movements were such only a small dog could pull off. Even if she was leaning against the door for balance, that was quite something.

She reached her paws towards the doorknob, but—

“A-aau... (I-I-I can’t reach...)”

It was a cry as if the world had come to an end. She extended her forepaws like her life was on the line, another few centimeters to go, but they wouldn’t reach.

“A-aauun (And wait... this stance is harsh...)”

After doing her best on two legs, Chris collapsed over.

... Just what was this dog even trying to do?

I felt like I was witnessing that thing you see on TV from time to time, a pet's erratic behavior sent in from one of the viewers.

“An, aan! (K-Kagoshima-senpai...)”

Lying on her belly, her legs still turned inwards, Kurisu looked up at me.

“A-an (I-I'm begging you... could you open the door to the bathroom...)”

Let these thoughts reach! Overcome the wall of words! Let the miracle come to bee!

Her desperate eyes seemed to scream.

“Yeeah.”

Receiving that look, I thought a bit.

“Could it be, you want to play to work off that meal?”

“Aan! (God is dead! You killed him!)”

She fell limp to the floor.

Chris' body continued to shake as if she was enduring an impulse welling up from within, but after vigorously raising her head, she exchanged a determined look with me and flopped down into position.

‘W’! ‘C’!

In human, or rather dog letters, she posed out two alphabet characters.

... Uwah, those movements are kinda creepy.

“A-annnnn~~ (Let it reach... my body language~~).”

Still frozen in the ‘C’ pose, she looked at me desperately.

What a surreal scene.

Yeeaah. If Chris boasted human-level intellect, there was a possibility that she was trying to use her body language to tell me something, but since she's just a pup, there's no way that could be true.

Which means, these are this pup's unique after-meal stretches or something.

“A... ann (Kagoshima... sen... pai... h-hurry and notice... this pose is harder to maintain than I thought...)”

Still curled into a ‘C’, she shook and glared at me. Her eyes were a little bloodshot. Even so, that was quite an amusing pose. Maybe I should take a picture? I’m sure Kurisu-chan would find it interesting. That girl did say she loved dogs.

Right when I tried to take my phone from my pocket—

“Kyaaaaan! (Erp—!)”

A large convulsion ran through Chris’ C-curved body.

“An an—a... m-my stomach, it’s c-cram, cramping—ah...”

At first, Chris made a sorrowful face, and then a mildly happy one. At the end, it was sorrowful after all.

“Okay, all cleaned up.”

Once I had taken care of Chris’ little slip up in front of the bathroom, I returned to the living room. Taking care of a pet’s lower body is also an owner’s job, so I have to be firm about that. But this time was really my blunder. Setting her free in a room and not preparing any place for her to go was my failing.

“I’m sorry, Chris.”

I tried apologizing to Chris laying on her back in the corner of the room, but there was no reaction. She’d been stuck like that ever since her little slip-up. Emitting an incredible negative aura, she was as active as a corpse. I thought dogs usually lay with their forepaws out front, but Chris put her legs to the side of her body, stretching out into what a human would call standing at attention.

“... An an (... I’m going to turn fifteen soon...)”

It was a bark like a curse, what’s more, her eyes were a little teary.

“Chris, you don’t have to be so down. See, you’re a dog, so no matter how much you leak, it’s not a problem at all. I mean, yeah, it’d be hopeless if a human did it,”

“.....”

“If you were human, then I think it would be too embarrassing to ever consider living on... but you’re a dog, so it’s A-okay.”

“.....”

“For example, if a pure teenage maiden wet themselves right before a member of the opposite sex, that would be humiliation on a suicidal level, but you’re a dog, so it’s fine.”

“..... An (..... Just end me already.)”

My sincere consolement rang out in vain, Chris didn’t come out of her corpse pose. What’s more, I got the feeling her negativity was only increasing.

Yeah. She really is down. What should I do...

Alright.

“Let’s give you a bath.”

Taking a change of clothes, a towel, and Chris, I headed for the changing room.

“Hey, quit sulking and get over here.”

But she wouldn’t come. Huddled up in a corner of the dressing room, she was trying to cover her eyes with her forepaws.

“A-an... (W-why did it come to this... T-taking a bath with K-Kagoshima-senpai of all things...)”

She was no longer letting off a negative air, but she seemed flustered by sudden developments.

“Well so be it... hup.”

I took off my clothes and put them in the laundry basket. My T-shirt and shorts, and of course my underwear as well. I was taking a bath, so I wasn’t going to have a single thread of fabric on me. I took a look at my own naked body in the dressing room mirror. Yeah, personally, I think I’m running just a little thin. I should try building some muscle.

“... Mn?”

I felt a gaze.

When I turned around, the position of Chris' blindfold paws had shifted a bit, as she stared at me in a daze. To be more precise, for some reason, she was staring blankly at my nether regions. It was a, "So that's how male bodies are constructed..." type of gaze.

"... Umm, Chris? You'll make me embarrassed if you stare like that."
"-!"

When I said that, she forcefully turned herself around.

"Kya-Kyan! (I-I wasn't looking at anything! I'm not a dirty girl!)"

She raised a high yelp. Her cute backside was turned my way. The tail that hadn't been moving a moment ago, was now in full wagging operation. I don't really get it, but was she excited?

"A-an... An an (Well, umm... I lost my father early, so I never even bathed with him! So I've never seen a man naked before, and I couldn't help but... Hyau!?)

As she writhed around, I lifted her up from behind."

"Now let's take a bath."

"A-au."

In my hands, she let out a contemplative voice as if she had given up and began pondering about life.

A quick wash of our bodies, and a dunk in the bathtub.

"Aaah."

"Aaan."

I held up Chris as her body was submerged in the tub.

"That's a good bath."

"An aan."

While she had been restless to a moment ago, the moment she entered the bath, she was splendidly relaxed. A "Why should I have to care about anything anymore," sort of attitude. It seemed like this child had grown quite accustomed to this 'special environment'. She was so relaxed, it ended up

sprouting mischief in my heart.
I tried letting go with both hands.

“Kyan!?”

The small Chris scratched against the side of the bathtub as she hurriedly started to doggy paddle. It would be pitiful to leave her like that too long, so I gripped her anew.

“Ahaha. Sorry about that, Chris.”

“An! Uuu (O-oh Kagoshima-senpai. I’ll get angry!)”

She moaned as her round eyes glared at me.
They were serene and beautiful eyes. A small building. An adorableness that just made me want to tease her.

“... When I look at you, I’m kinda reminded of Kurisu-chan.”

“!?”

Like a culprit whose name was identified by a great detective, Chris’ body stiffened up.

“Kurisu-chan, you know, she’s a girl one year below me.”

“... A-an (W-what, so the cat’s not out of the bag.)”

She suddenly raised a bark of relief. Each motion, each effort she made was cute, it really brought Kurisu-chan to mind.

“That girl you know, she’s honest and earnest, and always trying her best, a really cute girl who just makes you want to tease her.”

When I said that Chris writhed her body left and right in embarrassment.

“But the way she walks around town cosplaying as a witch is a real flaw in the crystal, or rather, a fatal blow that can never be taken back.”

Chris fell limp, she stopped moving.

“... Well, even if I say that, Kurisu-cha’s cuteness is justice. If it’s just a little cringe, then all’s well if I shut my eyes a bit.”

I was dealing with a dog who couldn’t understand me, so my real feelings ended up coming out.

“That’s why I’m always thinking over what I can do to make Kurisu-chan into my little sister.”

“... An (... Um, how am I supposed to feel about that?)”

“Do you think Kurisu-chan has an older sister? If she does, then I can marry that person, and get Kurisu-chan as a little sister-in-law.”

“An! (That’s not something a human mind would think up!)”

As she tried pulling away from me, taken aback, “Hey, hey, you’ll go under if I don’t hold you,” I drew Chris back in.

“... But you know, Chris.”

I said. I gently pat the dog’s head.

“Kurisu-chan never really lets me dote on her. It makes me a little sad.”

Chris blankly raised her head.

“Well, I’m sure it’s because I’m an unreliable senpai. I’m not sure if it means much coming from me, but it must be because I’m quite an unreliable man.”

“.....”

“Kurisu-chan, you know, at a glance she looks friendly and naïve—but that’s not how it is. That girl wasn’t made so simple.”

Her straightforwardness wasn’t held up by an unbending rope.

Her radiance gave birth to shadows.

I always wonder if there’s something to it.

Perhaps it’s just one of my usual, ‘imagination’s’. But that’s what it looked like to me.

“She’s a good girl who can get along with anyone indiscriminately but—at the important parts, she won’t let anyone into her heart. I think she’s bad at relying on people.”

For example, in studies.

Just like Kurisu-chan, Kagurai-senpai had subjects she was unnaturally bad at, and she would come straight to me for them. She would contact me of her own

accord, and make a plea proper.

But—Kurusu-chan was different. Only when I gave a semi-hard sales pitch of, ‘Is there anything I can do?’ did she ever try relying on me.

If I didn’t say anything, I doubt she would have ever requested, ‘help in geography’ from anyone. I don’t think she would be able.

“The line’s been drawn somewhere. Everyone has their line, but Kurisu-chan’s drawn hers far closer than anyone I know.”

“A-an! (T-that’s)”

Chris looked at me with wavering, sentimental eyes.

“An an (I mean... the fact that I’m from another world, the fact I’m a witch, I have to keep it hidden, so...)”

I couldn’t understand the dog’s words, so I continued where I left off.

“Hiding something, and having a secret you can’t tell anyone about, I don’t really mind that at all. Everyone has something like that.”

But.

Having a secret, and letting people into your heart were different matters.

And—that was no contradiction.

There was no reason one couldn’t stand on both pillars.

“She’s still a student—still a kid, so I think it’s fine if she shows those around her just a little bit more weakness...”

“.....”

“Well, I’m sure it’s just my fault for being unreliable.”

I muttered self-derisively.

“An! (That’s not true!)”

Chris gave a forceful howl, staring straight into my eyes.

“... An an an (... Kagoshima-senpai, you’re not unreliable at all... umm, if you asked whether you’re reliable or not, I’d have to say not, but... I-I can’t put into words, but Kagoshima-senpai, you’re really warm, so...)”

“.....”

“... An (... It’s all my fault. I’m the one who’s bad at relying on those around me...

for a long time now, it's how I learned to live... I mean, I'm... my mama's... a daughter of the Shuley House, and... and the Kurisu House's—)"

There Chris fell silent and lowered her head.

"An an an... (I planned on doing all my training in this world alone... but you saw me using magic, and let me stay over at your house, you invited me to the club... and I kinda wasn't doing it alone anymore...)"

"....."

"An an (That's why, that's why, Kagoshima-senpai, you're not—)"

As it to interrupt her own barks, Chris placed a hand on her head.

"I can't understand a single thing you said."

"A-auu—"

"But thank you."

There there, I rubbed her head.

Her words didn't get across, but I got the feeling I picked up just a little bit of her feelings. I could feel a bit of her sentiment from her tone and gestures, and they were warming my chest.

"A-an (U-umm)"

Eventually, Chris gave a hesitant bark.

I slowly closed my eyes, and inclined an ear to her voice.

"A-an an... (I-I lost my father early, so being doted on by a man was always a little bit of a dream... u-um, you said it a moment ago, Kagoshima-senpai... so)"

Chris spoke.

"Is it... okay if I let you pamper me more?"

At the lisping voice that suddenly resounded through the bath, I kept my eyes closed and answered without thinking deep.

"Yes. Of course."

I nodded.

.....

.....

H-huh?

Why is a girl's voice...? A Kurisu-chan-sounding voice...?

I timidly opened my eyelids.

To find a naked Kurisu-chan.

I closed them again.

No, no, no, no. Wait a second, wait a second, wait a second, wait a second

This is an illusion, a delusion. I'm going through puberty. Huh? Am I frustrated.....

Okay, let's calm down momentarily. Deep breaths, deep breaths. Yeah, I'm fine. When I open my eyes again, the delusion a pubescent boy might have will have faded away.

I opened my eyes.

Naked Kurisu-chan was still there.

With the posture of a small dog being held up by someone, she was submerged in the same bathwater as me, was she not? Her damp hair and skin were especially captivating.

... Hold it right there, what's with this situation? As a man, this is where I need to rejoice, but the development was so sudden my head was in a huge panic. No, but, it's that.

In reality, the steam doesn't really do its work. There's no strange light. I can kinda just see various things in their entirety...

"What's wrong, Kagoshima-senpai? Suddenly stiffening up?"

She blankly tilted her head in wonder.

Eh? Why is this girl so calm about this?

"K-kkkkkk-Kurisu-chan."

I said in a shaking voice.

"W-w-what are you doing?"

"..... Eh?"

Kurisu-chan's eyes widened, as she slowly lowered her eye level, taking a

good look over her own body.
Her naked... birthday-suited body.

“KYAAAH!”

[FANSERVICE IMAGE HERE]

A siren-esque scream roared through the bathroom.

“W-w-why? Why!?”

“Why is my line!”

I was supposed to be taking a bath with a dog!
And wait, where’s Chris!? Where did she go?

“U, UuUu, K-Kagoshima-senpai you perv!”

“Wrong! I haven’t done anything wrong! I’m just taking a bath in my own house!”

“A-anyways, please don’t look!”

Kurisu-chan screamed as she used both her hands to cover my eyes. I see, for a judgment on the spot, that wasn’t wrong. Certainly, like this, I can’t take in her nude. It was an action far more meaningful than using those hands to try covering her own body.

“—Wait, I’m still on full display like this!”

Kagoshima Akira, the body that takes center stage.

“I-I’m not looking at you because I want to!”

“It’s not like I looked at you because I wanted to either!”

“Then you didn’t want to see!?”

“Wha? Gah!”

My words jammed. Curse my honesty.

“... K-Kurisu-chan. Look, I’m sure you must be embarrassed yourself, but you know, I’m also extremely embarrassed here.”

“Bb-but aren’t men supposed to be overjoyed when they’re seen!?”

“That’s only a small portion of people!”

“Then Kagoshima-senpai, you’re not happy to have me look at you!?”

“Wha? Gah!”

My words Jammed. Curses, foiled again!

“H-hey, Kurisu-chan. This is my house’s bath... what are you doing?”

“Ttthhhaaaattt’ssss...”

She seemed incredibly pressed for words

And there—it all suddenly fell into place.

The clubroom after school. Orino-san. The dog Chris. A naked Kurisu-chan.

All the numerous pieces came together in my head, building up a single, clear picture.

“... I’ve got it. I understand everything, Kurisu-chan.”

“Wha! Eh? That can’t be...”

“Kurusu-chan, you—”

“Urgh...”

“—have been naked all the way from afterschool up to now.”

“... Hmm?”

She made an absentminded voice, but I continued on my grand deduction.

“Orino-san said it. That Kurisu-chan raised a war cry and ran off somewhere... And now that you’ve appeared right before my eyes, you’re still naked. On top of that, the supposed cosplay you make a hobby out of. There exists only one possibility I can make out of these components.”

The shocking truth that was coming to light!

“You’re actually naked under that robe you usually wear!”

“E-eeeeeeh!?”

How could it be? The powerful robe she inherited from my mother—or so the setting said, was actually worn naked.

That time, and that time, and even that time...

“Y-you’re wrong! There’s a proper set of undergarments underneath the robe! Being naked under that thin piece of cloth, that would just make me an exhibitionist, wouldn’t it!? The reason I’m naked right now is because I accidentally spilled a magic potion, and was turned into a dog up to this moment...”

“Eh? Kurisu-chan, you turned into a dog?”

“..... T-that was a lie. The truth is just as you say! I strolled all around town, naked with a robe! And since you looked like you were taking such a comfortable bath, I couldn’t help but assault you!”

“A-a pervert. There’s a pervert here...”

Oh my god.

My kouhai was a pervert.

Not a cosplay girl, just an exhibitionist.

“That’s right! I’m a pervert! I was so curious about my senpai’s nether regions I didn’t know what to do with myself! Aha, ahahahahaha....”

It was a dry laugh that showed a full mastery of the art of desperation. I had no idea what the pervert would do to me if I stayed where I was, so I escaped the bathroom in a dash. From behind, me, only a laughing voice that had gone past self-harming to self-mass-genociding creepily echoed.

Wow.

I think I’ll give up on making Kurisu-chan my little sister.

Perverts are a bit, you know.

This is something of a continuation.

The next day, I entered the classroom and got on my knees before Orino-san. I needed to apologize for letting Chris get away. She had run away when Kurisu-chan trespassed into the bath, likely using her entrance route. After that, I stayed up all night searching the town for her, but she was nowhere to be found. What the hell was I doing?

Just how am I supposed to apologize to Orino-san’s acquaintance...

Or so I thought, but when I heard from Orino-san that, “Chris went and returned to her owner’s house on her own,” I pat my chest in relief.

What a clever dog. Ag, thank the heavens.

By the way, to exhibitionist Kurisu-chan, I sent a senpai-ish text of, ‘if there’s anything troubling you, you can always discuss it with me’.

When I did, she replied, ‘I’m so happy to have such a reliable senpai.’ When she usually sent cute messages mixed in with emojis, this one was blank. I got a real dark and cynical feel from it, but it’s not good to suspect people, so I took it

favorably. 'Reliable? Oh, you're making me blush.' I wrote.

Chapter 2: Kagoshima Akira's Daily Life— With Kikyoin Yuzuki

‘Confess under the cherry tree, and you’ll definitely find love, eh...’

‘.....’

‘I thought it was the sort of absurd urban legend you’d find anywhere, but I was right to look into it. There really was a youkai involved... Umm, are you listening, Tamane-sama?’

‘Y-yeah. We’re listening. But it’s about this seelphone thingy you handed us, we just can’t grow accustomed to it. Is our voice truly reaching you...’

‘Don’t worry, I can hear you just fine.’

‘I-indeed.’

‘I’ll get back on subject. The ghosts inhabiting the sakura tree were a warring states-era princess, and a samurai. They could never be joined from their difference in stature, a sorrowful two.’

‘We recall hearing there used to be a castle around that area. We see, so the regrets of princess and retainer continue to persist in the world. That old chestnut again.’

‘By old chestnut, you mean it’s a common tale. The two are on the verge of forgetting the fact they were human and becoming youkai.’

‘Such is yet another common tale.’

‘If they stayed like this, just meddling a bit in human love affairs, I wouldn’t mind leaving them be... but it’s not goin’ to go down like that anymore.’

‘A ‘curse that forces one to stay within a certain distance from a man’ was it. Hmm. Certainly, that is a troublesome curse.’

‘Yes. Well, thankfully, I managed to seal ‘em in charms before they turned into true youkai. Takin’ them home, and goin’ through the proper exorcism procedure sounds like our best bet.’

‘Hmm. Very well.’

‘Yes. Then I’ll be starting back... Mn? Huh? The charm is—’

I got the feeling something rushed through my body.
The moment I slid the door open, something.

“Ah, Kikyouin-san. Howdy.”

An energetic greeting to Kikyouin-san as she gazed at the paper charms on the table. But after she took a fleeting glance at me, she returned her gaze to her charms.

... Yeah. Ignoring me as always. “Ah, it’s fine if you just ignore that guy. He’ll go away” sort of feeling right there.

“Huh...? They’ve gone docile. I thought they were goin’ to go on a rampage.”
“Are you the only one here today?”

“Yeah, looks like it... was it my imagination? I felt a strange power just now.”

Arbitrarily dealing with me, Kikyouin-san continued her staring contest with the charms. Well, I at least got a reaction out of her today, which is better than usual.

“What are you here for?”
“Nothing in particular... I just thought I’d study or something.”
“That so.”

Giving that curt response, Kikyouin-san suddenly began stuffing things into her bag.

“You look like you’re in a hurry.”
“I’m goin’ home. Don’t want to be alone with you.”

... Harsh.
Instead of an insult, I got the feeling she was just saying what she really felt, so it bent my heart for real. Watching over Kikyouin-san as she rushed out without saying her goodbyes, I took a seat. Now then, study time I guess. I’m not lonely alone. And it was at that moment.

“—Wha!?”

As she was trying to leave the classroom, just one step away, her movements came to a complete stop. She really was frozen in place; unable to lower her raised leg. It was roughly around three meters from me.

“D-don’t tell me...”

Wrrr, with stiff, robotic movements, she turned towards me.

“I-I’m cursed...? With this guy...? I can’t get a set distance away from this guy?”

She said with a stiff face before falling into a slump on the spot.

“You’ve got to be kiddin’ me... there’s no way, no way, no way. And for him of all people to be the centerpoint... I’m the only one who can’t get away...”

After mumbling to herself about something, she stood back on her feet and tried leaving again, but as expected, her movements game to a complete halt once more.

... Just what is she doing? Practicing that pantomiming she’s so good at?

“It’s no good... I really can’t get away.”

Her words mingled with a sigh as Kikyouin-san returned from the entranceway and sat across from me.

“Huh? Weren’t you going home?”

“... I thought I should study a bit myself.”

“Eh? Really?”

My heart brightened right up. What’s this, so she doesn’t hate me as much as I thought. I didn’t have to worry so much.

“... Annoying. This guys grin really pisses me off...”

I got the feeling Kikyouin-san said something in a terribly low voice, but it didn’t bother me in the slightest.

So our two-person study session began.

“And I’m stuck like this... I’m sorry, Tamane-sama. My mistake has made this more trouble than it had to be... umm, could you come save me... exorcising myself is proving too difficult, and there are too many restrictions placed on me... yes... yes. Thank you.”

Right at the onset, she immediately went to a corner of the room and made a

phone call, but she did eventually return to the table.

“Was that Tama-chan?”

“Yeah. She’ll be here soon.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Nothin’ to do with you.”

She glared me into silence. I mean, she’s scary.

Just like that, the two of us continued studying in silence.

... This isn’t very fun at all. The two of us are finally studying together, so I’d like us to study with some more pleasant conversation.

“Y-you know,”

“Quiet.”

“... Yes ma’am.”

She’s scaring me. Why is she in such a bad mood? Did I do something wrong? I didn’t have the energy or courage to take on the challenge, so I matched Kikyoun-san and studied in silence. As I was copying out English sentences, the tip of my mechanical pencil lead snapped and flew behind me.

Normally, I’d leave it be, but Kikyoun-san’s eyes were bothering me, so I decided to go get him. Alright, let’s show here I’m not a litterbug.

I went to claim the lead that had fallen quite a distance from the table—roughly three meters. When I dashed to get it as fast as physically possible—

“Ugoh!”

A groan rose behind me.

“What’s wrong, Kikyoun-san!? You sound almost like you slammed your solar plexus into a desk!”

When I hurriedly rushed over, she was crouching and holding her stomach.

“... It’s... no... thing...”

She glared at me with fearsome eyes. Those were eyes that sought vengeance for her parents’ death.

“Are you okay...? You look like you’re in extreme pain...”

“Leave me be...”

She said in a faint voice as she suppressed her solar plexus.
It's no good. I'm unable to leave a girl in such pain be!

"Stay where you are, Kikyouin-san! I'll go get the school nurse!"

I raced to the door. By the way, this might not have anything to do with the current situation, but I was sitting with my back to the door, so inevitable, Kikyouin-san had the table between her and it.

I exercised a starting dash sharper than I had ever managed before. For the sake of my friend, I could put out speeds exceeding my limits... I think. I can understand it now. How Dazai Osamu must have felt when he penned out, 'Ruun Melos'. Probably. I far exceeded my full strength, I sprinted with one hundred and twenty percent of my might.

"Ugoh!"

Another groan.
It was remarkable louder than the last time.
It happened when I was around three meters from the table.

"K-Kikyouin-san!?"

When I turned, Kikyouin-san was bent over the table, her whole body twitching. She reacted almost as if in such a short time, she received an additional impact to the same point.

"What's wrong, what happened!? If there's anything I can do, just say it!"

When I approached, she firmly grasped me by the shoulders.

"... I-I'm beggin' 'ya, don't go anywhere. No wandering around, just stay with me..."

She said in an uncharacteristically weak voice, looking at me with moist, upturned eyes.

"Just stay by my side forever and ever..."

She sounded terribly desperate.

“.....”

Misplaced as it was, my heart skipped a beat. I got the feeling I was hit with a surprise attack.

“U-umm... Kikyouin-san.”

I nervously asked.

“Was that a proposal?”

“—!”

Headed by a Kikyouin-san whose face was red as an apple, I received heavy damage. The pain was so great, “UgyaAAh!” I writhed around the floor, and when I got around three meters from the table, I heard another, “Ugoh” from Kikyouin-san.

... It was a catastrophe in various ways.

Kikyouin-san’s pain of unknown origin was contained, the studies restarted.

“Ah, come to think of it,”

“Die.”

... Her mood’s progressively worsening, that girl. But as I was gaining a resistance to her toxicity and boos, I continued talking without shrinking back.

“Come to think of it, was there a difference in lesson progress with your other school?”

Not too long ago, Kikyouin-san transferred from Kyoto. While she clad herself in a thorny atmosphere at first, she was considerably softer now.

It doesn’t look like she has many friends, but she was getting by without any other particular problems. As far as I could tell, she didn’t seem to be struggling in studies.

“... This school was a little ahead, but I managed.”

“Hmm. Did one of the teachers help you out?”

“No.”

She said stiffly, drumming her fingers against her printout. The letters decorating it weren’t Kikyouin-san’s fine penmanship, but a round, girly

handwriting.

“Is that possible a copy of Orino-san’s notes?”

“Right. She said she’d give it to me, so I’m thankfully putting it to use.”

“Hmm...”

That’s a bit of a surprise.

I was sure Orino-san and Kikyouin-san didn’t get along.

“At first, I thought I’d try asking Kagurai-senpai. She’s a senpai, for argument’s sake. But, you know...”

“Yeah, I getcha...”

That person’s no good at studies.

She was especially hopeless with literature, and her other subjects were, well, just plainly poor. Her knowledge related to computers was amazing, but everything else was lacking. “W-we never had to learn this sort of thing in my era!” the way she gave incomprehensible excuses was also hard to watch.

“And then when I didn’t even ask her, Orino-san lent me copies of her notes on all subjects. Well, I wasn’t that troubled to begin with, but I felt sorry to turn her away, so I took ‘em off her hands.”

Her cadence was especially fast in the latter half. She could just be honest that she was helped out.

“Sounds like Orino-san. But I’m a little surprised. When did you reconcile with Orino-san?”

“Why would we need to reconcile? ‘n wait... we were never really fighting to begin with.”

“Really?”

By my memory, I got the feeling there was a stormy mood between them from the first day she transferred in. Rather, I get the feeling Kikyouin-san was the one trying to pick a fight with all her might...

“I just hate kids like Orino who put on the diligent honor student act. Could never stand those sort of nosy busybodies. It’s irritating to watch.”

... How rebellious.

“Don’t you feel bad for Orino-san when you say something like that... she let you copy her notes, so you know...”

“... I just...”

Kikyouin-san averted her eyes and spoke softly.

“... I just said I hate kids like her, I never said I hated her...”

I noticed her cheeks relax on the murmur.

Kikyouin-san really is a good kid after all.

“I see. In that case, is that also the reason why Orino-san was always going at your throat? Like she’s not good with your type?”

“No, whenever Orino went at me, it was always because she was sticking up for—”

Kikyouin-san’s words stopped, she stared fixatedly at me with appraising eyes.

“Umm... s-something wrong?”

“Not reeeaaally. I was just musing how some people have terrible taste.”

She said nonchalantly, leaning her body forward a bit.

“Hey. What’s yer relationship with Orino?”

She asked.

“Our relationship... we’re just normal friends.”

“Hmmm. ‘n how did you get that way?”

How I started out with Orino-san?

On Kikyouin-san’s casual question, I thought back, back to the day I first exchanged words with Orino-san—

Orino-san and I went to different middle schools. Our first-year classes were different, so I only learned of her existence when I became a second year. When we decided class officers in the first term’s first homeroom, Orino-san nominated herself for class rep, and I lost at rock paper scissors and became vice rep.

“I’ll be counting on you, Kagoshima-kun.”

“Yeah. Pleasure to work with you, Orino-san.”

That was—our meeting.

“—That’s it!?”

When I finished the story, Kikyouin-san retorted.

“That was totally normal! The hell are you staring off into the distance with sorrow in the air? I was wondering what happened, but that’s the sort of high school meeting you could find anywhere!”

“Well yeah, because we’re the sort of normal high school students you could find anywhere.”

It’s a bother if you expect anything strange of me.

It’s not like we actually met before in my youth, or some romantic development like that. Kikyouin-san took a large sigh.

“Ah, come to think of it, a letter for you came in from Tsuchimikado Senzou.”

She said only just recalling.

“Tsuchimikado-san??”

Tsuchimikado Senzou was the con artist who tricked me out of one hundred thousand yen. I got seventy thousand of it back but was still waiting on the remaining thirty.

“... Good grief. Just ‘cuz he doesn’t know your mailing address, he had it sent to me.”

What Kikyouin-san took out with a complaint—was a folded crane.

“What’s that?”

“A letter. It flew into my place this morning. You can read it if you unfold it.”

I hadn’t the slightest idea why it was a folded paper crane, but pondering over that one wouldn’t get me anywhere, so I undid the folds, and read the letter inside.

“What’s it say?”

“He drones on a bit, but... to summarize, ‘I lost at horse racing, so you’ll have to wait a bit more on the money’ he says.”

Kikyouin-san seemed too fed up for words.

“Well, not much we can do about it. I’ll wait patiently.”

“You’re sure takin’ it easy. Don’t you have a grudge against that guy?”

“Mnnn. Honestly, not really. He got me good, but he did return seventy thousand yen, and he promised he would return the rest eventually.”

And also, said I.

“He didn’t seem like a bad guy to me.”

“... Hah. How idiotic. There should be a limit to bein’ good-natured.”

In a small voice, she rolled the words around her mouth.

“In that incident the other day, I can’t say for certain he was the only one who did wrong. But that doesn’t change the fact he did wrong.”

“Meaning?”

“From what I can pick up from his story, it seems like he had a cooperator—no, an accomplice. They’re the one who ordered Tsuchimikado Senzou to conduct scams in this town.”

Ordered would mean that this accomplice had a higher standing than Tsuchimikado-san. In that case, they would no longer be just an accomplice—but the real criminal.

“And who... would that be.”

“No idea. Apparently, Tsuchimikado Senzou only ever met their proxy. Unfortunately.”

She declared, with a cynical laugh. But her smile soon vanished as she stared out the window with sharp, narrow eyes.

“... It all feels too well-put-together.”

The words leaked.

“Tsuchimikado’s scam started at practically the same time I moved to this town. Almost as if—it was all meant to match up... but I really wasn’t scheduled to transfer to this high school.”

“Eh? Really?”

As she said it so matter-of-factly, I impulsively returned the question.

“I was originally supposed to go to a high school near Mt. Osore in the Aomori prefecture. But some sudden trouble happened there and it never worked out, so I was sent over here in a hurry.”

That’s why I transferred at such an arbitrary period, she said uninterestedly. So she had that sort of circumstance...

Kagurai-senpai said, “In Heisei Literature, it is only inevitable that transfer students transfer in at arbitrary times, and you’re not supposed to say anything about it. If you’re troubled how to develop the story, throw in a transfer student, that’s how school stories work. Just tack on the convenient excuse, ‘for my parent’s work,’ and you’re set!” she spoke knowledgeably on the subject, but contrary to that, it seems Kikyouin-san had a proper reason.

“That’s why I can’t shake this off feeling. If the Tsuchimikado case was timed aiming to overlap with my transfer...”

Her mouth bent into a frown as she thought. It seemed the atmosphere was going to get heavy, so I changed the topic in a bright tone.

“But I’m glad that your transfer was suddenly changed.”

“Hah? Why?”

“I mean, it’s thanks to that, that I could become friends with you.”

“...”

After a brief instant dumbfounded, Kikyouin-san let out a tremendous sigh.

“... Good grief, I was an idiot to try talking seriously with you.”

While sounded fed up, there was a slight bitter smile on her lips.

In that half-lax, half-tense dubious sort of air, we continued our study meet. A while later, I left for the bathroom. The small one. The urinal in the very back was the cleanest, so I decided to do my business there.

“.....”

Around the time I reached a hand to my zipper, I sensed a strange presence

beside me. Come to think of it, it seemed like someone entered when I was around three meters from the entrance but was it that person?
I turned to the side—and jumped back.

“K-Kikyouin-san!?”

There stood Kikyouin-san, red to the ears. “... Why has it come to this, why has it come to this...” she muttered as she gripped her skirt tight.

“Why are you doing!? This is the men’s room!”

You gave me a real surprise there. I almost spilled.

“... I-I.”

“You?”

“Made a mistake...”

“You made a mistake!?”

So she was a klutz?

No, but when she said that, I had no words to return.
Nothing I could do if it was a mistake.

“I see... h-haha, how silly of you...”

“... Yeah. I’m a silly person.”

“H-haha. How very troublesome...”

“Right...”

“.....”

“.....”

“I’m... I’d be very thankful if you left.”

With eyes of, if I could do that, we wouldn’t have a problem, she glared at me. As that fiendish look startled me, Kikyouin-san spoke in a rough tone.

[IMAGE]

“Hey, how long are you going to stand there!? I-i-if your’e going to do it, just get it over w ith already!”

“You intend to watch!?”

So she doesn’t plan to correct her mistake!?

I think some old guy said, to err and not change one’s way is what it means to

truly err or something like that! (TL: This is Confucius)

“Umm... uh, could it be you actually want to see me... discharge?”

“What!?”

“No, um, I have yet to reach that state of mind, or should I say... my preferences exceedingly normal, so I don’t think I can keep up with your abnormal fetishes.”

“Hold it right there! Why are you under the impression I’m abnormal!?”

“... I mean Kikyouin-san, you do baby play with your sister.”

“Wha!? Y-you... still remember that.”

Well yeah. It’s not something easy to forget.

I fully intend to take it with me to the grave.

“Ah, of course, I haven’t told anyone, so don’t worry.”

“... Well Thanks For That.”

Kikyouin-san’s cheeks twitched as she gave a monotone thanks. It felt cynical, but instead of reading too deeply into it, let’s just honestly accept her gratitude.

“... Hey, instead of the one in the very back, use this toilet over here, This one might just barely work out.”

“What will?”

“Ah, for Christ’s sake! Just get over here!”

Grasped by the lapels, I was forcefully dragged to the urinal beside Kikyouin-san—shoved in front of one around three meters from the entrance. Once she positioned me, she hurriedly left the men’s room. While the inside of my head was filled with questions, for now, I did my business and left. For some reason, she was waiting for me outside, and the two of us returned to the club room together.

... Huh, it’s almost like we’re really close friends.

I didn’t know what was making Kikyouin-san so displeased.

Tap tap tap tap, her fingers were drumming at a faster tempo, and she would frequently check the time on her cellphone. The wrinkle on her forehead dug in so deep, I worried it might get stuck there. Even I didn’t have the courage to start a conversation here, so I silently went over my notes.

“You piss me off, die!”

“Just like that!? I haven’t done anything yet!”

“Your existence pisses me off... ah, god. What is Tamane-sama doing. She said she’d be here fast...”

She sounded annoyed; she started fidgeting restlessly.
Rather than irritated, she looked like she was panicking—

“.....”

Suddenly, loudly, pushing back her chair, Kikyouin-san stood. Her shoulders trembling all over, she spoke desperately.

“.. H-hey, you.”

“What?”

“Don’t you want to go to the restroom?”

“Eh... no, I just went a moment ago. Less than half an hour, even.”

And wait, you were there too.

“I-I see...”

Kikyouin-san mortifyingly bit her lip. She directed me a look of embarrassment and anger.

“I-I really want to go to the bathroom.”

“Eh... oh, I see. Have a nice trip.”

She didn’t have to go out of her way to say it. Don’t girls usually try to hide that sort of thing?

“S-s-so y-you’re coming with me...”

“Why!?”

I really don’t get the meaning behind her ‘so’. This girl is using her conjunctions wrong. Asking me to follow her to the girl’s toilet, that would just make me a pervert!

It’s not like she has some circumstances that prevent her from going to the bathroom without me.

“That’s... y-you know, there’s a rumor that ghosts show up in the stalls, and I’m scared.”

“You of all people!?”

Kikyouin-san seemed so at her wits end, I reluctantly tagged along to the girls' bathroom.

“You got that!? Think about something else the whole time! Don't turn your ears this way! If you hear anything, you're seriously dead!”

“... Then I'll be a little away from the door.”

“Y-you can't! You have to stay right next to the door! Otherwise, I can't reach!”

I don't get her.

After screaming at me, Kikyouin-san entered the stall. But I really shouldn't wait in the lady's room too long. People rarely came up to this floor, but it's not like no one ever came at all. That being the case, I quickly moved from the door.

Thud.

I heard a well-rung sound from behind. Judging by the noise alone, I surmise Kikyouin-san hit her head against the door.

“Kikyouin-saaaan, you're not supposed to headbutt doors.”

“..... kill kill kill kill...”

The door creaked open, and from inside, a demon... no, a high school girl with the eyes of a demon appeared. She grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and forcefully made me kneel in front of the stall door.

“You're staying right there until I come out! You got that!?”

I wasn't any more enlightened on the situation, but losing to the intensity of a raging god, I nodded and nodded.

“T-that's right! Lend me your phone for a second!”

When I followed orders and took my phone from my pocket, it was snatched right away. Kikyouin-san hammered in a number and returned it to me.

“That's Tamane-sama's number. Instead of thinking about me, concentrate on talking to Tamane-sama! Also, while you're at it, tell her to hurry up!”

She said as she entered the stall once more. I followed orders, still kneeling, I placed a call to Tama-chan's number left on the screen. So even elementary

school students have cellphones these days, I thought when,

‘A-ahoy hoy?’

I heard a familiar voice,

‘Yeah...? Was it ahoy hoy? No, just hello...? Hmmmmm.’

“Hello, Tama-chan?”

‘Gnn. So it was hello...’

“Yeah. Hello’s right. It’s been a while, Tama-chan.”

‘Mnn, who are you?’

Ah, right. Since I’m the one calling, my name won’t show on her screen. Listening to her awkward voice that wasn’t yet used to a cell phone, some mischief sprouted in me.

“It’s me, you know me.”

“Mnnn!? Don’t tell us, you’re one of those, ‘it’s me’ scam people! We won’t fall for your foul trickery! Yuzuki properly instructed us!”

It really was cute how she fell for it so cleanly.

“Haha, sorry. It’s me, me. Kagoshima Akira.”

‘Kagoshima Akira? Don’t know him. No one like that in our memory. If you’re going to lie, think up something better.’

...H-huuh?

Could it be I’ve been forgotten? Or wait, does she not know my name?

Crap, I’m going to cry.

I thought we got along well enough...

“Umm, r-remember? It’s me. Kikyouin-san’s, Kikyouin Yuzuki-san’s friend Kagoshima.”

‘Hmph! Yuzuki has no friends!’

“.....”

Things were getting unpleasantly deep, so I fell silent a bit. But how troublesome. Tama-chan isn’t going to remember me.

‘Wait. That voice... don’t tell us, you’re that whelp who got wrapped up in that scuffle with Tsuchimikado Senzou, aren’t you?’

“T-that’s right! The whelp from back then!”

That’s good. Looks like she remembers.

‘Good grief, if that’s who you are, just say so. What’s your business? Rather, why do you know our seelphone number?’

“I got it from your sister. Right, right. So Kikyouin-san told me to tell you to hurry up.”

‘Whaat? ... Ah, ahaaaaa, that’s right. We were called by Yuzuki. We completely forgot.’

“You forgot?”

‘Indeed. We got entranced in this mobile game, and by the time we came to, it was already this time.’

“... So that’s the reason you’re going with?”

So Tama-chan plays mobile games.

It feels kinda off... just for her character.

‘We aren’t yet accustomed with phone calls, but this thing called mobile gaming is truly interesting. Indeed. Well, we understand your business. Tell Yuzuki we’ll be there soon.’

“Yeah, I’ll tell her.”

‘... We’ve been thinking it for a while now, but,’

Tama-chan spoke in a curious tone.

‘Why do you refer to Yuzuki as Kikyouin?’

“Eh?”

‘You could just normally call her by name... well, you’re free to call her whatever you want, but when you say Kikyouin, it brings way too many people to mind, truly misleading.’

“Oh I see.”

Her last name’s also Kikyouin. They’re sisters after all.

“Yeaah, I don’t have any particular reasons.”

Calling people by surname was just my general stance. Though I often call small kids like Tama-chan by given name.

The only one I really call by first name... is that childhood friend of mine.

‘We see. We were simply a tad curious, don’t pay it much mind. Well then.’

The call cut.

Kikyouin-san wasn’t out yet. She told me to use the phone to cover my ears, but all I could hear from outside was the sound of flowing water. Since I had the time, let’s try thinking about names.

It would be a bit embarrassing to start calling Kikyouin-san Yuzuki-san at this point. Rather, it’s a bit strange for her to be the only one I call by first name. Since it’s come to that, am I better off calling everyone else by name as well? Yeaaaaah.

Perhaps I should use a nickname or something more friendly.

“... Alright. At a time like this, your best bet is to consult with someone.”

I placed another call. The dial tone rang out a few times, but it connected soon enough.

‘What’s up, Kagoshima?’

The person I called was Kagurai-senpai.

I get the feeling I might forget if I didn’t concentrate, but this person was my senpai, one year older than me. She’s supposed to have more life experience, and should be the best person to discuss this sort of thing with.

“Do you have time right now?”

‘... No, I apologize, but I’m in the middle of combat—in a game. So if you’ve got business, please make it quick.’

Her voice was filled with impatience. I could hear tension almost as if she had fallen into an enemy trap and was pressed hard against the corner. It really wasn’t anything serious, so I made it short and simple.

“Can I start calling you Monyumi?”

‘Go f*** yourself.’

Kchk. Boop, boop, boop.

.....

Yeah. Let’s stick with surnames.

When Kikyouin came out of the bathroom and we returned to the clubroom together, there was Tama-chan. Tapping away at her cellphone. When did she get here?

It hadn't even been five minutes since that last phone call.

For some reason, the window that was supposed to be closed was open, but, well, I can't think that had anything to do with Tama-chan. The only one who could come in from there would have to be a witch, a psychic, or a youkai perhaps.

"T-Tamane-sama..."

Kikyouin-san beside me let out a voice of relief from the depths of her heart. Those were the eyes of one bearing witness to a hero's fashionably late arrival.

"Seriously, just what were you doing? If it was you, Tamane-sama, I thought you'd be able to get here in under a minute... because of that, I was, I was..."

Kikyouin-san was a little teary-eyed.

... This kinda uncontrollable sense of guilt, and a dreary urge to say, "Was it really that bad..." welled up on my chest. I wonder why.

"Our apologies, Yuzuki. No, we started this way the second you contacted us. But along the way... we were surrounded by youkai."

"Youkai? D-don't tell me the survivors of the ones we took care of the other day..."

"Mn? Ah, yeah. That's precisely right. Even if this necklace has lost its effect, if we used the power of nine tails, there's no telling who might sniff us out. It took us some time."

"Oh no... my apologies, Tamane-sama. I didn't know what you were going through."

"Oh, don't mind it, Yuzuki. They weren't phose to write home of."

"....." I was at a loss for words.

Tama-chan... was lying...

Not a word about mobile games. What a fearsome child.

"Now then. We must strike while the iron is hot. Let us get this over with."

Following Tama-chan's directions, Kikyouin-san and I stood face to face with one another. Tama-chan began scrawling out a star symbol between us. I

warned her, “Hey Tama-chan, don’t doodle on the school floor,” but Kikyouin-san stopped me.

She really is soft on her little sister. Well, I just have to erase it later.

As a mature high school student, let’s just tag along with a grade schooler’s games.

When the star was done, Tama-chan took out two paper charms decorated with complex patterns. Placing one at each of our feet, she closed her eyes and put her hands together. From there, Onkoro~ or Sowaka~ she started chanting some indiscernible spell,

“—Seal—”

Finally, in one stroke, her chop severed the air between me and Kikyouin-san. In that instant— I got the feeling something, a something that had been linking the two of us was cut. A something that could never be reclaimed. Suddenly, a rending regret started to well up in my chest— actually not really. It was a link born from some shoddy mistake, so I didn’t really care.

“Alright. It has been lifted. All that’s left is to take our time exorcising.”

Tama-chan wiped the sweat off her brow, putting the two charms away. If she’s done, I’d better wipe away the drawing on the floor, I thought, but it had already cleanly faded away.

... Did she use that type of ink that disappears as time passes? How considerate.

“Ah~~, thank god.”

Letting out a relieved breath, Kikyouin-san immediately began putting the notes and stationaries on the table away in her bag.

“Let’s hurry home, Tamane-sama. There’s no reason to stay here. I don’t want to spend another second taking in the same air as this idiot.”

She jeered me as per usual. It made me a bit sad... but Kikyouin-san’s face seemed far more cheerful than it was, so I was happy.

That’s good.

I don’t really get it, but it looks like she’s perked up.

“... W-why are you smiling like that? How idiotic...” She mumbled something quietly before turning to Tama-chan.

“Now let’s be off, Tamane-sama.”

“Don’t be in such a rush, Yuuki. No need to panic.”

As she sat in a chair and mae herself at home, Tama-chan added on an,
“Also,”

“Since we were making the trip, we brought along what you forgot this morning. Be thankful.”

“I forgot something?”

“This.”

She placed something wrapped in black cloth on the table. Once the wrapping came off, the inside was revealed to be a lacquered, multi-layered food box.

“We wondered what you got up so early in the morning to do... we never thought you’d take to making sweets. As we recall, it’s a western treat called a kooky? When you don’t even normally cook, what twist of fate be this?”

“T-that’s...”

“What’s more, to forget it. You’re surprisingly absentminded, Yuzuki. How about it? Since we’re here, let’s eat it together. Whelp, you have some too.”

“Are you sure? Then I’ll thankfully have some.”

“Y-you can’t!”

Kikyouin-san raised her voice, but she was already too late.
Tama-chan had already opened the lid of the box.

“Erk.”

The moment she bore witness to the contents, Tama-chan grimaced. I followed on to look. What was in the expensive-looking lacquered box was... a black substance.

Black, or rather, dark brown, or rather ash.

To put it simply, it looked like the bakery work of a master roof tile maker.

“... I didn’t forget it, Tamane-sama. I failed, so I left it behind.”

A self-harming smile on her face, Kikyouin-san spoke softly.

“O-our apologies. Yuzuki. We were sure...”

“No, it’s fine. Now let’s hurry home.”

The moment Kikyouin-san tried to shut the lid.

“You’re not going to have any? Then give it to me.”

I said as I grasped a single black cookie and delivered it to my mouth.
Nom. Crinkle crinkle, crunch crunch, gulp.

“Whoah, it’s delicious. Kikyouin-san, so you were good at cooking.”

When I gave my honest impression, the cookie maker closed in with an incredible look of anger.

“W-what do you think you’re doing!?”

“Eh? Tama-chan said I could eat it so... I wasn’t supposed to?”

“No, that’s not what I meant... i-is it alright?”

“What about it?”

“What... um, the taste and such.”

“Taste? It’s delish, no complaints there.”

It was gravelly and hard, silky smooth like I was licking sandpaper, and aggressive as if it was launching a direct attack on my mouth. If I had to accurately express the taste—

“Truly, ‘drier than the desert sands’.”

“Is that really tasty!?”

“As if it was buried deep in the earth’s crust for thousands upon thousands of years, a flavor with some depth to it.”

“A fossil! You’re talking about a fossil!”

“If I had to raise a low point, it’s a little burnt, but... not enough to be a problem. It’s got some nice savory un, und... under. Umm... what was it again?”

“... Are you trying to say undertones?”

“Wrong, wrong. Umm... that’s right. An underworld of taste. Makes for a true life or death struggle!”

“Just say it’s bad already!”

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem my impression was getting across.
Erk. When it really is tasty.

“... Burnt isn’t enough to right This one off. We wouldn’t be surprise if the immortal bird rose from it at any moment.”

With a fearful expression, Tama-chan cautiously reached out a hand. A

number of jet-black cookies disintegrated to dust just by the touch of her small hand. It seems hardness varies by product.

Hmhmm. What a smart production you've got there, Kikyouin-san. Meaning we're able to enjoy an element of randomness in the flavor.

Nom. Chchchchchchchchch! Gulp.

"Yep. They're great."

"Really!? Your mouth just made the sound of a ninja using a chidori, you know!"

Nom. Gogogogogogogo! Gulp.

"Yep. They're great."

"A stand just manifested in your mouth, didn't it!"

Nom. Zukyuuun. Megyaan. Gulp.

"Yep. They're great."

"What's even was that!? Did Dio just force a kiss in your mouth, then get Hol Horse to summon the emperor!? Wait a second, just what's happening with my cooking!?"

"I must admit, I made the last three sound effects, yours truly."

"Don't screw with me!"

I was hit considerably hard. Looks like I took it too far. But as expected of the unexpected manga lover Kikyouin-san. It's satisfying to receive such precise retorts.

"But joke or not, they really are tasty."

There, Kikyouin-san suspiciously furrowed her brow.

"... Could it be their appearance is just like that, but they actually tasted good?"

She said as she timidly reached out her hand and ate one of the black substances.

"~~~~~!?"

Immediately after, she held her mouth as she looked restlessly around the area when she spotted a tissue box, she violently tore out around ten sheets and used them to spit out everything in her mouth.

What a waste.

“... Y-you, I’m telling you to stop eating those things already!”

“Eh? Why?”

“Why, you ask...”

“Yuzuki. He is a man.”

Tama-chan looked at me with eyes of respect.

“To avoid shaming a woman, a man will eat disgusting sweets that look no different from a clay mask or pot, and call it tasty. This here is a man amongst men.”

For some reason, my stock seemed to be on the sudden rise, and having her food called disgusting, Kikyouin-san turned a little despondent. So I stuck up for her.

“It’s not disgusting. It’s really tasty.”

“... That’s enough. ‘n wait, for you to eat that and call it tasty, are your taste buds alright?”

“Yeeaah. If I had to say, they’re weak. I don’t really get it myself, but I’m apparently what the world calls taste deaf.”

“Hmm. So even you’re taste-dumb. Are you the protagonist of some shonen manga?”

She was toxic, but her lines seemed to contain some vague praise. Sure enough, a lot of shonen manga protagonists have no sense of taste, and sturdy stomachs. Take Kochikame’s Ryou-san, he’s fine eating soap.

“Hmm. What’s with you? It’s not just your head, even your taste buds are stupid? Aah, I’m an idiot for feeling a little happy when you said it was delicious.”

“Eh? You were happy?”

“I-I wasn’t happy at all!”

Looks like she wasn’t happy.

Even so, judging by Kikyouin-san and Tama-chan’s reactions, these pitch-black earthen wear cookies do not taste good by the world’s general standards. After thinking a bit, “Kikyouin-san,” I called out.

“When you boil it down, humans cannot feel the joy of the world lest they go through the filter called self.”

“... Hah?”

What’s with this guy, he’s suddenly talking about the world, her stiff expression said, but I continued on without heed.

“For example, even if we look at the same object, each person has their own way to see it, and their own way to feel. Of course, this isn’t only limited to sight. Touch, smell, hearing—and taste.”

“.....”

“What other people think when they eat these cookies is something I’ll never know. But when I ate them, I thought they were tasty. So in my world, that’s how they are.”

I said, starting into the remaining cookies.
Under the half-fed-up eyes of Kikyouin-san and Tama-chan, I polished off all the remaining cookies in the box. I was hungry.

“Thank you for the meal.”

I properly put my hands together, said my prayers, and closed the lid.

“Thank you, Kikyouin-san. They were delicious. Don’t be discouraged, please make and bring them again sometime.”

“.....”

Kikyouin-san began wrapping the box back in the cloth, she hung her head in silence. Eventually, she mumbled in a small voice.

“... If I feel like it.”

“Come to think of it, Kikyouin-san. Why did you suddenly think to make cookies? Today was the first day you ever made them, right?”

Around the setting sun-dyed school gate, I nonchalantly asked.
After eating all the cookies, my stomach was full, and I’d completely lost the will to study, so I decided to return with the Kikyouin-sisters. At present, the three of us were walking amiably side by side.

“... No reason. Nothing in particular.”

“Mn? What’s that, Yuzuki, we were sure you were making them for this whelp. Are we wrong?”

As Tama-chan said it, staring puzzlingly, Kikyouin-san stopped her feet, her expression freezing over.

“Yesterday night, we heard you mumbling, ‘That idiot helped me out, so I have to give my thanks when they’re due.....’ or so, right? That’s why we proposed we eat it with mffffm.”

Tama-chan’s mouth was hurriedly muffled.

“Umm, they were for me?”

In that case, I should have savored the taste some more. So were cookies Kikyouin-san made for my sake.

“W-wrong. I didn’t do it for—”

There, Kikyouin-san made a blank face.

“... I give up. This is stupid. I ain’t a freakin’ tsundere.”

She said, with a large sigh.

“That’s right. I woke up early and worked all morning for you. You’d better be thankful.”

“Yeah, I’m thankful. Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“..... Wrong, something’s wrong... why am I the one being thanked? After they came out so terribly...”

Kikyouin-san put her hand on her forehead, she began mumbling in agony. When I tilted my head, Tama-chan beside me said, “This is that. Yuzuki’s contrarian nature and her inborn honesty are grappling neck and neck in her heart,” making the face of a little sister watching over her big sister. I get the feeling this young girl actually really likes explaining things.

Gngnnn, groaned Kikyouin-san, but eventually, she turned forcefully towards me.

“Kagoshima!”

“Y-yes?”

I stuttered my response. Kikyouin-san rarely ever called my name, so when she actually used it, it ended up making me nervous.

“Umm, the other day, that time with Tsuchimikado Zenzou. You helped me out quite a bit...”

“With Tsuchimikado-san Umm, did I really?”

Did I do anything? I only remember getting scammed and catching a cold in the sudden downpour. And wait, why is Kikyoin-san's face that red?

“I feel ashamed for letting a civilian like you meet with such danger... and if you weren’t there, I doubt it would have gone so well.”

No, seriously, why is she making such a suffering, embarrassed, uneasy-mixed face of conflicted emotion?

“So there’re some things I’ve just got to say...”

She said, her harsh eyes glaring at me.

While those sharp eyes were usually scary, just for now, for some reason, they didn't frighten me at all. Leaving a bit of silence, Kikyouin-san spoke.

“T-tha...”

“ ”
.....

“Tha-tha.”

“Tha? Is something wrong with your thigh?”

"Tha, tha, tha, than, than."

“... Seriously, then what?”

“Thathathathathathathathathathatha!”

“!?”

“That’s all folks!”

With a wave of her left hand, she made off like a raging hurricane and disappeared from view. At the school gate, a dumbfounded Tama-chan and I were left behind.

“... Whelp. What was that supposed to be?”

“... It’s from before your time.”

But Kikyoun-san chose an amazing time to make a reference.

[IMAGE OF KIKYOUIN YUZUKI STRIKING A POSE]

This is something of a sequel.

The next day, Kikyouin-san was absent with a stomach ache.

‘Don’t screw with me... seriously, you’re dead... dead... u-urp...’

I heard a pained voice across the phone. I winced back from that call that was definitely made for the sole purpose of cursing me as I spoke.

“I didn’t do a thing. But you know, didn’t you spit it all out into the tissues?”
‘I swallowed a bit... it was lethal in small doses... I’m surprised you could eat something like that...’

“No, you’re the one who made it. And I didn’t force you to eat.”

She got what was coming to her. Rather, played a part in her own play. After crumbling an endless stream of curses, the call was one-sidedly cut. I returned to the clubroom from the men’s toilet and called out to Orino-san. I wanted to learn remedies from a professional on stomachaches. At first, Orino-san made a, what? Why me? Sort of face, but afterward gave me some good advice of, “... She should be fine if she takes some medicine and gets some good sleep.”

I-I see!

I get the feeling that was an exceedingly normal treatment, but when you get to Orino-san’s level, you go around the whole circle, and arrive back at normal, eh. The fundamentals are everything to a pro, it’s something like that. Surely.

To convey that valuable advice, I went to the men’s room again and placed a call to Kikyouin-san.

“.....”

I was still blocked.

... So she gets to call me, but she doesn’t want me doing it?!?

Chapter 3: Kagoshima Akira's Daily Life— With Kagurai Monyumi

‘Phew. Looks like we’re finally done cleaning up after that serious of events, Monyumi.’

‘Yeah. Now that we’ve finished hunting down the buggle stragglers, we can finally catch our breath.’

‘But we really were in danger back there. Falling smack dab into an enemy trap, you know. When you think of where we’d be if the kid didn’t call—sends a shiver down yer spine.’

‘... Back then, I thought, “Don’t call me in a pinch!” but if it hadn’t been for Kagoshima’s call, it wouldn’t be strange if we would up dead. I’d never be able to avoid that attack...’

‘I really don’t get what the brat’s up to, sometimes.’

‘My thoughts exactly... by the way, Gakuta. It’s been bothering me for a while now, but isn’t your voice higher than usual?’

‘Say what? ... Yeah, now that you mention it, that might be right... ‘n wait, something’s been bothering me too, but my field of vision’s kinda higher than usual.’

‘Hmm. How strange. I was just thinking I was shorter than I remembered.’

‘.....’

‘.....’

‘O-oy, wait a second... why can I see my marvellous pretty body on the table?’

‘W-why am I looking down over myself from above the table...?’

“Don’t tell me—!”

“”We switched!?””

Just as I slid the clubroom door open, Kagurai-senpai and Gakuta-kun cried out—meaning, Kagurai-senpai was lonesomely practising ventriloquism on her own.

“W-what’s happened here!?”

“Oy, oy, oy, this is real f-king sudden. That body switch thing that gained a dubious level of popularity in Heisei Literature...”

With faces of shock, a cold sweat flowing like a waterfall, Kagurai-senpai and Gakuta-kun conversed. She’s as high strung alone as always, this senpai of mine.

“... Come to think of it, I’ve heard of it before. As I recall, around the time the B3 World was first opened, there was a bug that made human personalities swap upon simultaneously returning from their avatars to their real bodies, it occurred at around once in a million, or something...”

“When the B3 World first opened... just how many hundreds of years ago are you talking about? Why would that happen with our level of technology?”

“You say that, but right now, we’re just making use of the B3 World Reloader forcefully opened up with this era’s internet as the groundwork. It ain’t strange if these malfunctions occur.”

“I guess you have a point... ah come to think of it... this stuffed animal you use as your container is considerably old. Barely anyone uses ‘Personality Transfer Type Self Propulsion Model Automata’ in this day and age.”

“Doesn’t matter, I like it quite a bit, this cute plushie body.”

“H-hey! Don’t use my hand to hit this head! Forget that, for now, we have to do something about this situation... wait, Kagoshima!?”

There, the two of them finally noticed me.

I had already entered the room, used the teapot I brought in from home to brew the tea leaves Kikyouin-san’s family sent her, and drink it from the teapot Kurisu-chan brought in, “Yeah. Good leaves really make the difference,” I let out a breath of hot air.

A tremendous skill to live and let live, if I do say so myself. Paying mind to each and every one of Kagurai-senpai’s eccentricities was a waste of time.

“Pleasure. Sorry to intrude.”

“Y-yo, kid. Well, just take it easy.”

“Eh?”

I tilted my head. Huh? Was that how Kagurai-senpai talked?

“H-hey Gakuta! You’ve got to properly act like me!”

“Ah, right. My bad, my bad, completely slipped my mind.”

Kagurai-senpai and Gakuta exchanged some words before they looked at me once more.

“Oh me, oh my, I seriously want to kill some normies.”

“That’s how I am in your head!?”

“Ahaha. Classic Kagurai-senpai.”

“And he accepted it!?”

“What am I, what am I...” Gakuta-kun on the table sorrowfully muttered. I get the feeling Gakuta-kun was supposed to be more overflowing with self-confidence, but come to think of it, Gakuta-kun’s just a doll, and a fictitious character acted out by Kagurai-senpai. I wonder if she’s at the stage where she’s begun exploring new characters? As always, this person was never negligent in polishing her own ventriloquism craft. So there, I asked what had been bothering me a bit.’

“So both you and Gakuta-kun are using the same voice today.”

“Eh?” the two of them exchanged a look.

When Kagurai-senpai would usually sound like a completely different person, today’s Gakuta-kun was just using Kagurai-senpai’s normal voice. Maybe her throat was out of it.

“Come to think of it, you’re right. When I’m supposed to be in Gakuta’s body, I’m still using my own voice.”

“Right you are... that there’s probably my ‘natural voice reconstruction program’ producing a timbre that matches Monyumi’s character.”

“I see, so that’s how it—wait, Gakuta!”

Gakuta-kun wrung out his voice. When I chased the stuffed animal’s light of sight, I found Kagurai-senpai lifting up her own bust. ... Just what is she doing, this senpai of mine.

“S-sorry there. No, the bra’d up part was reeeally botherin’ me, see. Are you always wearing these bunching, raising things? It feels like I’m being strangled; weird.”

“Shut it, shut it! O-oy, don’t touch the skirt!”

“But these skirts you know, when you actually wear one, they’re ridiculously

low security. Too breezy for me to calm down. ‘n wait, Monyumi, why are you wearing such frisky panties?”

“Stop! Don’t play with my body, you pervert!”

“Oh shove off. Don’t know what you’re getting so worked up over, but I ain’t gonna lust after my own little sister’s body.”

“Hey hey! You’re not even trying to hide that fact anymore!? Weren’t you taking on the, keep it ambiguous for the time being sort of stance!? At least put in the effort to hide it!”

“Weeell, it’s kinda a pain in the ass, so does it really matter anymore?”

“G-g-give me back those feelings! The sorrow when you died, and that misery when you told me, ‘I ain’t your brother anymore. I’m just your AI pet Gakuta...’ with that hardboiled air, give it back!”

Kagurai-senpai and Gakuta-kun’s fun and loud exchange went on. I really couldn’t understand what was so interesting about today’s ventriloquism act, so I silently sipped my tea. Yep. Delicious.

Even so.

Today’s Kagurai-senpai is a little different than usual.

She calmly corrects the position of her bra and panties right in front of me, she scratched her head painstakingly, and she’s a little bowlegged.

In other words, her girly components had suddenly decreased.

Normally, no matter what crazy things she said, not losing her refined disposition was Kagurai-senpai’s charm... ah, could it be this is her real face? Did the makeup finally come off?

..... ‘Tis a pity.

“H-hey, Gakutaa... I’m begging you act right. Kagoshima’s looking over here with exceptionally cold eyes... as it is, my dignity as a senpai had been lost as of late, but I just heard it disappear entirely...”

Gakuta clung to Kagurai-senpai’s hand—or so Kagurai-senpai made it look. Even if she had lost her girliness, her puppeteering was in good health.

“But look here, Monyumi. When you boil it down, do you really have to push them up like this? No matter how stacked that Orino girl is, this ain’t a competition.”

[IMAGE]

“Wha!”

“Yes, that lass’s chest is certainly splendid. But that’s nothing to be jealous about, eh? Don’t worry about it, I think you’ve got a nice thing going for yourself.”

“Wha, wha, what!?”

“Come to think of it, ever since you met her, you suddenly started adjusting your avatar’s chest to a larger size.”

“Say one more word and—!”

I pulled back a bit as Gakuta-kun exclaimed in Kagurai-senpai’s voice. So she held that much envy towards Orino-san, this person. No, I don’t really mind if a girl is mindful of her chest size, but... why is she using ventriloquism to reveal that to me? Knowing that just makes it awkward.

Is it that? Is this that reverse sexual harassment thing?

... Yeah. I see. I’m sure Kagurai-senpai’s tired.

“Gakutaaa... now he’s sending really warm eyes. He’s giving the smile of the Buddhaa. He’s definitely thinking, ‘I should treat her with a heart of compassion’...”

Gakuta-kun sounded like he’d burst into tears at any moment, but, “Gyahaha,” Kagurai-senpai laughed for joy.

“A-anyways, there’s not a minute to lose, let’s get back to our original bodies as soon as possible, Gakuta. I’m already sick of this erratic situation. Let’s think up a serious solution strategy.”

“Yes ‘m. But there’s no real need to panic. I already know how to solve it.”

“Say what?”

“Despite the damages, I heard these ‘personality swapping’ type bugs are actually quite simple after all. In essence, they never became too big of a problem. Like rebooting a problem, just dive into the B3 world again, and once we return, we should be back to normal.”

“Oh... so it’s that easy... then we’re getting right to it, Gakuta. I’ve had enough of this stuffed animal body.”

“That’s what I’ve got to live with, kid. But hey, I’ll have to pass on your body too. You’re too tall, your legs are too long, and you’re trained, so it’s easy to move around. Been a while since I’ve had a human body, so I was just a bit moved. Since I’m usually stuck in that restrictive stuffed animal body, it’s like a dream...”

Kagurai-senpai suddenly quieted down and gazed over her own body. She started to quiver.

“Huh? Wait a tick, right now, aren’t I free? Isn’t this the best?”

In that instant.

Kagurai-senpai’s eyes filled with hopes and dreams, while Gakuta-kun’s fell into despair.

“That’s right, that’s right... I can go wherever I want like this. I usually can’t even take a stroll if I don’t have Monyumi carry me...”

Kukekeke, an extremely malicious smile floated over her face.

“O-oy, Gakuta. Calm down. Let’s take a deep breath and calm down. Okay?”
Gakuta-kun desperately tried calling her to a stop, but—

“Gyahahahahahahaha! I’m freeeeeeee~!”

Raising a high low-brow laugh, Kagurai-senpai left the clubroom at a maddened pace.

“O-oh crap!”

Gakuta loudly exclaimed and held her head.

“Dammit! To think it would come to this. Just what does that Gakuta take his sister’s body for!?”

“.....” I kept silent.

“The fact he took off with my wallet is the real kicker! This is bad... that guy’s definitely going to waste a pretty penny. It’s always been like that, if you give him any money, he’s the sort that uses it all up come tomorrow...”

“.....”

“What are you doing, Kagoshima!? We have to give chase. We’re chasing after Gakuta—no, I mean my body. This body isn’t going anywhere in a hurry, so you have to carry me and give chase!”

“.....”

“Ah... umm, uh, e-even if I’m telling you to carry me, don’t touch anywhere strange, please carry me gently... this Personality Transfer Type Self Propulsion Model Automata boast high functionality in the strangest places, and it’s made so I can feel all sensations taken on by the stuffed animal body... a-anyways, hurry up!”

“.....”

“You have to hurry, Kagoshima! Gently take me in your arms!”

I got the feeling I just heard an amazing line, but putting that aside, I simply had to exclaim at this mysterious phenomenon that showed no signs of correcting itself.

“... How is Gakuta-kun talking when Kagurai-senpai isn’t here?”

When Gakuta-kun’s a stuffed animal who can only talk through Kagurai-senpai’s ventriloquism?

“..... Ah”

After sounding out as if he attained a sudden grasp of the situation, Gakuta flopped down on the desk. In a truly stuffed animal-ish way.

“What, so I was imagining things.”

That’s right. There’s no way Gakuta-kun could talk or move on his own. The reason he kept talking must be because Kagurai-senpai was still nearby the room using her ventriloquism, and the reason he was still standing was because Kagurai-senpai left him that way, which he remained until he lost balance. It all has a logical explanation.

“Now then.”

Since everyone had left me alone, I stretched out my back.

“The bother’s gone, so I guess I should study.”

“(Who are you calling a bother!?)”

“Mn?”

“.....”

For a second, I felt like I was retorted to in an extremely small voice, but Gakuta was silently stretched out.
It seems I was imagining things.

I thought someone would come if I waited long enough, but even after twenty minutes, I was alone in the room. Light poured through the window into the desolate space. Despite the fact this was surely the optimal environment to study, I found I couldn't concentrate in the slightest.

The reason being...

For the whole while, I got this slight inkling that Gakuta-kun was moving.

“.....” (shuffle shuffle) “.....” (staarre) “.....” (flop) “.....?”
“.....” (shuffle shuffle) “.....” (staarre) “.....” (flop) “.....?”
“.....” (shuffle shuffle) “.....” (staarre) “.....” (flop) “.....?”

Why do I feel like I'm playing red light green light?
It felt like Gakuta-kun was secretly moving only when I wasn't paying attention.

“Aah, it's no good. I can't concentrate at all.”

Putting down my pen, I leaned my back into the chair and looked at the ceiling.

“Good grief, this is all your fault.”

My inability to study was solely due to my own lack of concentration, so I was well aware I was simply taking out my frustration. But I just kinda got the urge to push against the stomach of Gakuta-kun lying face up on the table.
I was dealing with a stuffed animal, after all.

Not holding back, I gave a slightly strong—push.

“Fgwah!”

Gakuta-kun suddenly let out what sounded like the voice of a girl prodded relentlessly in the abdomen.

“(C-crap!)”

“W-what was that!?”

I was startled into a panic. Flustered into a panic.
It seems that Gakuta-kun was panicking all the same, his body fixated stiff and unmoving. Though I say that, he's a stuffed animal, so he wouldn't move anyways, but when there's no one else in this room, why did such a strange sound come from pushing Gakuta-kun's—

“D-don't tell me.”
“...!”
“Gakuta-kun was actually a squeaky toy this whole time!?”
“...”

What a shocking revelation.
I knew he was no ordinary stuffed animal, but to think such a new function had been added on; who would've guessed? I got the feeling Gakuta was looking at me in a, “I'm glad he's an idiot,” sort of way, but that doesn't matter. Why not play around with this new find.

“As expected of Kagurai-senpai's partner.”
I mused as I reached out my hand again, and—pushed.
“Fgwah!”
Push, push, push.
“Fgwah! Fgwah! Fgwah!”
Push, push, push, push, push, push, push, puuuuush.
“Gwah, gwah, gwah, gwah, gwah, gwah, gwah, gwaaaaah!”

Now then.
While this is sudden, the time has come for I, Kagoshima Akira, to unveil one of my seven secret techniques, ‘Sixteen Consecutive Strikes’!

Pushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpushpush!
“Agyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyahgyah!”

For some reason, the stuffed animal's squeaks sounded like its death throes. After taking on my Sixteen consecutive strikes, twitch! Twitch! His body convulsed as he seemed to show the whites of his eyes.

“Boring.”

Well, I'm not a kid. I'm not going to be entranced in playing with dolls forever. Softly putting the doll I'd finished business with beside me, I restarted my studies.

In the corner of my eye, "(... I won't forget this grudge... I'll take it with me to the grave ...)" I got the feeling Gakuta breathed out the line of a big bad on the brink of ruin, but, well, that must be my imagination.

Just when I thought I'd finally be able to concentrate—

Beepbeepbeep, beepbeep, beep, beep, beepbeep, beepbeepbeep. A tone with a characteristic rhythm resounded through the room. It was most likely a ringtone, and as it wasn't mine, it was probably Kagurai-senpai's. It was easy to forget, but Gakuta-kun was the phone strap. He was stuck to the phone with a fashionable cable run down by countless white fibres. Since he was larger than the cellphone itself, it honestly looked to me like the phone itself was the part that was strapped on.

The peculiar rhythm wouldn't stop.

On that tone, I suddenly thought back to a certain episode with Kagurai-senpai.

'... Yes, this is Kagoshima. What is it, Kagurai-senpai? At a time like this...'
'Kagoshima, big trouble. We're in a race against time. The fate of this era hangs on your shoulders.'

'Huh!? W-what are you talking about, Kagurai-senpai!?'

'About that manga you lent me the other day, only volume six was missing!'

'.....'

'Volume five's ending was a dreadful cliffhanger. At this rate, the world will be left in limbo, unable to die, unable to live on!'

'... And you called me at three in the morning for something like that?'

'What do you mean something like that? This is serious business.'

'Just give me a second... Ah, it was in my room. It looks like I just forgot to put volume six in. I'll bring it tomorrow. My apologies, Momimomi-senpai.'

'It all rests in your... wait, what did you just say!?'

'Ah, I'm sorry. I'm half asleep, so my mental notation slipped...'

'Mental notation!? That's what you've been calling me in your head!?'

‘It was a joke. That name only comes up when I’m really irritated.’
‘... Eh? Could it be you’re angry, Kagoshima? Not a morning person?’
‘.....’
‘D-don’t go silent there! It’s scary. Guys like you are the scariest when angry.’
‘.....’
‘I-I’m sorry, Kagoshima. So you don’t have to be so...’
‘... zzz’
‘Wait he just fell asleep!’

... Wrong. Not that trivial episode. What I really wanted to recall was—

‘Kagurai-senpai, you customize your ringtones for different callers, don’t you?’
‘Yeah. It’s quite convenient that way.’
‘Then what was that one?’
‘That one was—the melody for when an urgent message comes in.’

That’s right.

This characteristic rhythm playing right now is from back then. Meaning at this very moment, an urgent mail’s come to Kagurai-senpai’s phone—
Eventually, the tone stopped, the prior stillness returns.

... Well, it’s that person we’re talking about, so even if it is an urgent message, it’s probably just her mom saying, ‘today’s dinner is curry’ or something like that.

While I was a little curious, I couldn’t peek at someone else’s messages, so I left the cellphone on the table and returned to my studies.

.....

How strange.

I got the feeling Gakuta-kun just moved again.

“.....” (shuffle shuffle) “.....” (stare) “.....” (flop) “.....?”

I sent a careful look, but he didn’t even twitch. It really was my imagination. But wasn’t his face even more desperate than before?

“.....!”

Gakuta-kun's body suddenly shook as if he'd been struck with a miraculous idea. Huh? He did move!?

I was surprised, but that surprise was already dampening.

"Vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv!"

Gakuta began to lightly vibrate.

“Vvvvvvvvvv!”

It was definitely a vibration. The vibration feature you would definitely find furnished in every phone. Ah, I see. So the reason Gakuta-kun began to sway was due to the vibrations transmitting down the phone strap.

“Vvvvvvvvvv.”

... No, but his movements kinda seem extremely unnatural. His vibrations aren't as minute as a normal vibrating phone's, and the rhythm isn't uniform. A human-like quality was oozing out into his movements.

Especially in the bottom. His bottom was shaking something dreadful, that bottom.

Those were the movements of the Nohara House's eldest son.

(TL: Nohara Shinnosuke, AKA Shin-chan of Crayon Shin-chan)

On top of that, the “Vvvvv” sound seemed to be coming from his mouth... is that phone alright?

“Vvvv. hac hac. Vvvvv.”

It choked!?

The phone just choked along the way there!

“Vvvvv... haaah, haaah. Fff. Vvvvvvvvvv!”

It's tired!?

It's getting worn out!

I took a deep breath. Good grief. It looks like the vibrate feature on the phone Kagurai-senpai uses is having a fatal breakdown. I'd better tell her to get that checked up on next time I see her.

Just how long is it going to shake? I thought, as I watched over the movements

of the phone and Gakuta-kun ant noticed the two were gradually moving.
This is that.

Since they're on top of a solid table, the phenomenon where a phone's movements carry it. That thing that sometimes makes it fall onto the floor. As luck would have it, the route of Gakuta-kun and the phone seemed to be aiming for precisely that ending, moving in the shortest possible distance to the nearest fall. As they reached the ledge, I got the feeling their movement speed increased.

“Ah. That was close.”

I brought them to a stop. Just out of good will.
... I didn't know why, but I was gripped with a sense of guilt as if I had in an instant wasted the entirety of someone's earnest effort. The Gakuta-kun stopped by my hand let off the dull aura of despair only held by those who had given up on life, but,

“—(Kuwah!)”

Immediately after, an undying will to fight blazed up in his eyes!

“Vvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvvv! Vvvrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrnnnnnnnnnnnn!”

“It's accelerating!?”

This phone really is done for!
Is it loaded with a nitro engine!?
Before a vibration that surpassed the extent of my kinetic vision, there was nothing I could do as the phone and Gakuta veered by my hand and leapt off the table with incredible force.

“(I-I did it! Wait, now's no time for joy. I have to open the message before I hit the ground— Fgwah!)”

It was a strangely lively landing sound.
The stuffed animal and phone landed in the shadow of the table. I stood from my seat and went to retrieve them.
The cellphone had been flipped open by the impact of the fall. What's more, I'm not sure how it could have happened, but for some reason, the messaging screen was open.

High Importance

Report pertaining to the 'Mini Garden Plan'

This mail has been sent only to those related to the Inoue Big Three (Kagurai, Shakujii, Shingai) Houses.

Today's board meeting has reached the final verdict on the 'Mini Garden Plan' under prior consideration.

Kagurai House. Shakujii House. Shingai House. The representatives of these three houses have unanimously decided on the execution of this plan. In accordance with this decision, the provisional name of, 'Mini Garden Plan' shall remain as the official name of this project. We pray that this plan will bring hope to humanity.

In regards to individual roles, you shall be informed the moment any changes are made. Kagurai Monyumi shall continue to—

I didn't intend to look the moment I picked it up, but the mail screen entered my eyes. It wasn't good to intrude on someone else's privacy, so I instantly closed it and placed it on the table with Gakuta-kun.

— The way we're going, humanity will be destroyed, right?

— Well, the higherups hold pretty much the same outlook. And of course, they're searching for other ways to prolong humanity's existence.

Kagurai-senpai's ventriloquism I happened to overhear a while back revived in my head.

Why?

I wonder why I was recalling that conversation come so far.

"... Well, I guess it doesn't matter."

I stopped thinking, I sat in the seat again. It was in bad taste to dig too deep into someone else's mailbox.

When I took a glance at the table,

“.....”

Gakuta-kun was sullenly silent, not moving a muscle.
How truly stuffed animal-like of him.

The light entering from the window gradually put on the colors of red, as the clock needles were about to round six ‘o clock.

“... It’s about time I went home.”

Putting down my pen, I took a stretch in the chair. While there were a few things disturbing my heart, I was able to accomplish some commendable studies.

“Even so...”

I muttered as I shifted my gaze to Gakuta-kun.

“.....”

For a long while, Gakuta-kun hadn’t moved or spoken in the slightest. He cast his eyes down all the way. When that was supposed to be perfectly natural, for some reason my chest was astir—

“..... (Sss, ssss, ssh)”

Ah, my mistake.
His form was more like he was in a deep and sound sleep.
My chest’s at peace, full stop.

“... I wonder when Kagurai-senpai’s going to get back.”

She had run off with a grand laugh, but more than two hours had gone by since. If only she hadn’t forgotten her cell phone, I’d be able to contact her. But for Kagurai-senpai to forget her phone was—quite a surprise. I always pictured her with her phone as a set. Across the world, cellphones were becoming an indispensable accessory for high school students, but even ignoring that, her phone fit her like a glove.
Her phone strapped to the large stuffed animal called Gakuta-kun.

“Seriously. For her to forget her precious partner, what a terrible senpai I

have.”

I said as I heaved Gakuta-kun up.

I didn’t really mean anything by it, but I kinda wanted to push his stomach.

“Fgwah!”

It was the same sound as before. Looks like he really was a squeaky toy.

“(… haah, haah. You just had to pick the worst possible wakeup call.)”

I got the feeling Gakuta-kun glared at me with the surprised eyes of someone who just woke up, but, well, this stuffed animal always had a bit of a harsh look in his eyes.

“Gakuta-kun.”

In that empty afterschool room, I called out to the stuffed animal. It made my blood run cold imagining someone might see me like last time, but even so, I wanted to talk to him.

“Thanks for always helping out Kagurai-senpai.”

“.....”

Naturally, Gakuta-kun didn’t say anything. I went on without paying heed.

“If you weren’t there, I’m sure her heart would’ve broken long, long ago.

Having a partner like you’s what’s letting her maintain a stable mind.”

“(… A stable mind… good grief...)”

I got the feeling he said something cynical in an extremely soft voice, but mixed in with the calls of sports clubs and the practising pitches of the wind instruments, I couldn’t catch it. There’s no way something as occult as a stuffed animal talking could happen in the first place.

“It’s troublesome how she can never let go of her dolls. Honestly, I was struck off my feet by her loneliness. In my seventeen years of life, I’ve never seen someone as lonely as her.”

“(… Who are you calling lonely? Who?)”

Gakuta-kun made a mildly offended face… I think.

But I,

“No, you’re wrong on that one, Gakuta-kun.”

I rebutted even if I knew there was no meaning to it.

“Kagurai-senpai... is lonely.”

Dignified and strong when looked at from afar.

A small touch, and she's bright and friendly.

But just another step in—and you can feel her fleetingness and frailty.

“When we're together, she acts like a 'slightly off but reliable older sister' but... that's not who she really is.”

“.....”

I continued my words at the silent stuffed animal.

“Kagurai-senpai's actually a coward, she's actually quite delicate, she's actually a weak young girl, I think.”

She's a girl with a considerably fun personality, but at times, she makes a lonely sorrowful face that sends shivers down my spine. Every time I see that face, something closes in on my best. That was no expression for a high school student of this peaceful era to make.

“Maybe she lost someone too close to her?”

“(...!)”

“That's why she—”

As if terrified of losing again, perhaps that's why she keeps herself so close to those around her. For instance, the reason she gathered members to try creating the community called the ComClub might have been because it was too lonely to go on alone.

Did she get scared of the loneliness?

She said something about the student council, but with her debate skill and brains, there were surely plenty of ways to go about it. Studies were something she was incapable of, but it wasn't as if she had a bad head on her shoulders.

I tried to continue on my words but—stopped.

I realized, I reflected. It was far too selfish of a conjecture to come to on my own. Both my parents work overseas, so I live alone in a vast house. The

loneliness that hits abruptly with isolation, I knew it just a bit. Though that was likely a trivial loneliness that couldn't even compare to Kagurai-senpai's.

"That's why, Gakuta-kun."

I gazed straight into the stuffed animal's eyes.

"Let's work together, the two of us, to support up Kagurai—senpai."

I knew I couldn't do anything big. I was well aware. Even so, I wanted to do as much as I could. If I was able to divert that person from her loneliness in even the slightest, that was enough.

"(... Just how bad does your timing have to be, Kagoshima...)"

Gakuta-kun's head flopped to the side. He took on a posture as if he was trying to avoid making eye contact.

"(Right when I'm the one inside... w-why do you have to say something so embarrassing..... you could've just said it to Gakuta.....)"

Gakuta-kun didn't say anything after all, but, "Yeah, thank you," I arbitrarily exclaimed, and came to the decision he accepted my proposal.

Perhaps that's the sort of thing ventriloquism is.

Right.

Ventriloquism.

"Now then. How about we play a little more Gakuta-kun?"

"(?)"

I momentarily placed Gakuta-kun on the table.

"Play along with my ventriloquism today."

I said with a bright smile.

Fu fu fu.

Kagurai-senpai did it so frequently, and at such a high level, I kinda wanted to do it myself. To tell you the truth, I've been practising it at home as well. Thanks to the buildup of earnest effort, I think I've gotten to the level I can perform at a modest school arts festival.

Gakuta-kun's always with Kagurai-senpai, and I could never find the opportunity to borrow him, but... now's my chance. I'll cast my ventriloquism on him, as I did once before.

I grasped Gakuta-kun (coincidentally pinning him to the table), looked into his eyes, (coincidentally looking down on him from above,), and said with a smile.

"I'll properly put my hand in your behind."

"—!"

In an instant, Gakuta began running rampant in my hand. Were the vibrations running up him again? I concluded and continued on without paying mind.

"Ever since Kagurai-senpai once did an extremely dirty joke, I've never seen her put her hand inside Gakuta-kun. If there's a hole, she might as well use it."

I said, as I turned to Gakuta-kun's behind, and reached out my hand.

"(Wai, wai, wai, wait a second! Whawhawha, what a-a-are you trying to dooo...!?)"

I got the feeling I heard a panicked voice come out of the pinned-down Gakuta-kun's mouth, but that definitely couldn't happen. I mean, Gakuta-kun's just a stuffed animal.

My hand approached the hole.

"... If (it's come to this, then a maiden's purity takes precedence over the rules—! Stop it, Kagoshima! It's me, me! I'm inside of Gakuta right now! If you're wondering how I can speak, then I'll arbitrarily explain it, so for now, get that hand away from me—!)"

"Hmm? If?"

For just a moment, I thought Gakuta-kun let out a yell, though all I could hear was an if.

And there, those movements as if he would slip out of my hand at any moment came to a sudden stop.

"(H-huh... w-why can't I let out my voice anymore... what's more, my body won't move... d-d-don't tell me I'm suffering a mechanical failure now!? D-did I force this body too much in that vibration from before... no, was it this idiot's sixteen consecutive strikes... you're joking... it just had to be now of all times...)"

It seems the vibrations had finally stopped.
Okay, now I can concentrate on my ventriloquism.
My hand approached the behind.

“(S-stop it Kagoshima! Do you think you can get off with this!? I’ll definitely, definitely never forgive you! You’d better remember this, I’ll be back for revenge!)”

... I wonder why.
When I’m not supposed to be doing anything wrong, more so, this was the correct way to play with this sort of puppet, a fearsome shroud of guilt and immorality budded from my chest.
Well, that’s just my imagination.
My hand approached the behind. Another twenty centimetres.

“(E-EEK! W-wait, you have to wait, Kagoshima. Let’s talk this out. Right? If it’s you, I know you can hear my voice. We’ve got a thing going, no matter how different I look, we can understand one...)”

My hand approached the behind. Another ten centimetres.
“(... Wait, wait, wait. No, there’s no way. It ain’t happening. Why do I have to go through something like this... w-w-what have I been doing all my life...? You can’t... U-urgh...)”

My hand approached the behind. Another five centimetres.
“(..... U-urgh, eep... s-stop it... urk hic... I don’t want it, I don’t want this... I don’t want my first time to be up the...)”

My hand approached the behind. Another four centimetres.
My hand approached the behind. Another three centimetres.
My hand approached the behind. Another two centimetres.

“(K-Kagoshima... I-I’m begging you, please, be, gentle...)”
My hand approached the behind. Another centimetre.
Just a little longer, the moment I’d touch Gakuta-kun’s secret place (?)—

“I’m home! Gyahaha! Maan, it really kicks ass to be able to walk free. Hey,

Monyumi. I ended up spendin' just a little bit, but don't you worry about it!"

The clubroom door was forcefully slid open, and in came a Kagurai-senpai with both her hands full of bags from the game shop.

Now then, now then.

How about we look at the present situation objectively.

One man pinning Gakuta-kun the stuffed animal on the table, his hand about to enter his behind.

And the stuffed animal's owner who happened upon it.

.....

Huh? Why does it feel like my life's over?

There's nothing strange about that description at all!

"... Bastard."

Kagurai-senpai called me bastard. In a super low voice, no less.

"H-huh? You're angry? No, I definitely touched your stuff without permission but..."

"What do you think you're doing to my sister, dammitt!"

And so, Kagurai-senpai beat me black and blue.

She didn't have to be that angry... I thought, but for some reason, I thought I'd done enough to warrant it.

This is something of a continuation.

The next day, Kagurai-senpai called me to the club room.

After school I opened the door to the room and tried to give a light greeting of, "Hello", but right after getting out a "Hell," I collapsed onto the floor.

"Fu fu fu... good of you to make it, Kagoshimaa..."

Mounting my body, Kagurai-senpai made a smile malicious to no end.

“W-w-what’s the matter, Kagurai-senpai...?”

My fear was such that I could only manage a quivering voice out of my throat. What do I do? When a female senior’s mounted me, an event straight out of my wildest dreams, I’m not happy in the slightest. Strike that, I’m terrified.

“... You sure got one on me yesterday.”



“What... no, the person who got done in yesterday was me.”

I was beaten all over. My joints were still sore.

“The one who did you in yesterday was Gakuta. My grudge still remains...”

She spat some incomprehensible words as she loudly cricked her fingers.

“... It’s all your fault Gakuta’s body broke, Gakuta used up all the money I’d been carefully saving, a-and... putting me through such humiliation...”

“I’m sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

And I get the feeling she just threw in something completely irrelevant to me as my fault.

“Doesn’t matter! Let me take out my anger on you!”

“You’ve shown your true colors!”

“First, sixteen blows to your stomach!”

“Why!?”

“Revenge. Do unto others what’s been done unto you! An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!”

“Objection! That revenge has no validity...”

... Wait it does!

For some reason, I get the feeling it does. I ended up thinking there was helping if I was hit around sixteen times. How peculiar.

“Eat this! Sixteen-hit nail punch!”

“Nail punch!?”

I had abandoned myself to sixteen consecutive blows, but a nail punch!? To think she would apply that gourmet battle manga I lent her here of all places!

... After that.

I took on sixteen powerful punches, “Now try vibrating as finely as you can,” she asked for the impossible, and at the very end, “Turn your ass this way!” she sexually harassed me. She bullied me to such an extent I began wondering if I had no choice but to become Kagurai-senpai’s groom.

Chapter 4: Kagoshima Akira's Daily Life— With Orino Shiori

'Oh, Kurisu-chan.'

'Good day, Orino-senpai.'

'What've you got there... chocolate?'

'Yes. My friend from over there sent it as an apology for the other day. I thought I'd share some with everyone. Ah, have one if you'd like.'

'I can? Then I'll just go ahead.'

'... Huh? There's a letter at the bottom of the box... umm, 'This one lasts half a day, enjoy ≡'... Wait, whaaaat!? Orino-senpai, whatever you do, don't eat it!'

'Eh? I already ate it—! Urgh, some... ng, my body, is...'

'Orino-senpaaaaaiiiii!'

When I opened the clubroom door, I found two girls inside.
The first was Kurisu-chan.
The other was...

"... Who?"

A young girl I had no recollection of. Her age was perhaps around seven? She was a truly adorable young girl, but for some reason, she was wearing a baggy Adatara High School Uniform that was clearly too big for her.
That young girl... that little girl was nervously looking around the room as if she didn't know where she was.

"O-oh, Kagoshima-senpai... fancy meeting you here."
"Yeah. Good day to you too, Kurisu-chan. Who's the kid?"
"U-uumm..."

As Kurisu-chan was pressed for words, the little girl in the room raised an uneasy voice.

"H-heyy... Kurisu-chan, what happened to me...? My uniform feels kinda

loose, but... huh? Kurisu-chan, you've grown bigger than me...?"

The little girl began to panic, so Kurisu-chan produced a hand mirror from her bag.

"Ah, wha..." The girl's face shifted between pale and flushed. "I-I-I became smaller? My body shrunk..."

"I'm really sorry! It was my lack of attention! There's no way that kid would ever send over an honest apology..."

"E-eeeh? No way, that can't, my body to shrink..."

She started prodding her pudgy cheeks before taking on the pose of the scream, all the while with Kurisu-chan lowering her head.

Body shrinkage and such, what could this child be talking about?

Is she playing Conan or something?

I wasn't quite able to swallow down the situation, so I tried asking Kurisu again.

"So in the end, who is she?"

"U-ummm," Kurisu-chan's eyes began to swim at a fearsome pace. "This girl is... r-right! She's Orino-senpai's little sister!"

"Orino-san's little sister?"

"That's right! Isn't that right, little sister of Orino-senpai!?"

"P-precisely. I'm my big sis Shiori's little sister!"

I looked over the kid again. Now that she brought it up, I could see she was identical to Orino-san. The color of her hair, the make of her face and such, every little detail was reminiscent.

It was almost as if Orino-san herself was just shrunken down.

"Hmm. I never knew Orino-san had a little sister,"

I muttered as I squatted down near little sister. Getting down to her eye level, I introduced myself.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Kagoshima Akira. I hope we get along."

"P-pleasure to meet you."

"What's your name?"

“N-name!?”

The little sister ended up making an exceptionally troubled face. While she directed a look seeking salvation towards Kurisu-chan, Kurisu-chan waved her hand as if to say, “No way, no way.”

“M-m-my name is...”

She spoke in a rambling tone.

“Orino... Orino Shiori, not that, I mean Orino, Shi, Shio, Shio, ri... Shio, Oshi, Oshi... Oshiri—Right! I’m called Orino Oshiri!”

“O-Oshiri?”

“Yes! I’m Orino Oshiri!”

“... O-oh, I see. T-that’s a cute name.”

(TL: Oshiri translates to Bum, Bottom... etc.)

I did my darndest to make a smile and praise her.

No, but still, what a terrible name.

I know it’s not right to make fun of people’s names, but even taking that into account, what a terrible name. No matter how you look at it, calling her a butt is just plain cruel...

“... Why am I so bad at thinking up names on the spot...” Oshiri-chan covered her face with both hands. “I-it’s cute, you’re alright!” Kurisu-chan tried to cheer her up.

“... O-Oshiri-chan, do you have a nickname at school?”

I really didn’t want to call her Oshiri-chan, so I tried asking. But I soon regretted that laid-back statement of mine. Crap. With a name like that, isn’t there a possibility she’s being bullied at school...

“A nickname is it... u-umm... let’s see... Ah.”

This time Oshiri-chan thought a bit before answering.

“At school, they call me—Osiris.”

“Cooool!”

I couldn’t help but cry out at that unthinkable coolness. I must take back that

previous statement. It works. Oshiri totally works as a name. Totally works. It ain't broke, don't fix it.

There's no doubt this kid's popular at school. Forget bullying, they must revere her as one of the three gods.

(TL: In the Yugioh TCG, Slifer the Executive Producer's original JP name was Sky Dragon Osiris)

"Is that... cool...? As I recall, Osiris was the name of some country's god, wasn't it Orino-senp.. I mean Oshiri-san?"

"Y-yeah. An Egyptian god. If I recall correctly, he's often depicted as a green-bodied man, and I I don't get the feeling he looked particularly cool."

Unfortunately, my feelings didn't seem to get across to the two girls. Good grief.

When you say Osiris, of course you're talking about the Sky Dragon!

I took down a gulp of saliva, containing my heightening pulse as I put that nickname to mouth.

"Osiris."

... Whoah. Crap. I'm getting super high-strung here. Osiris, Osiris, Osiris...

"W-what is it?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm so high in the clouds I might start crying, so I'm just going to normally call you Oshiri-chan, okay."

"... Just how much do you idolize Osiris?"

Oshiri-chan made a taken-aback face. Well, I guess only those in the know could understand these feelings

"That aside, why is Orino-san's little sister Oshiri-chan here?"

When I posed the question a little past its expiry date, the two closed their mouths.

'Kurusu-chan, this one's yours.'

'Eeh!? I-I can't...'

'Neither can I! I'm really bad at this sort of thing!'

'Urrrgh... u-understood. It's my fault after all, I'll do my best.'

Or so they made a sort of incomprehensible eye contact, after which Kurisu-chan took a step forward.

“Orino-senpai brought her here. Apparently, Oshiri-chan came to play at the high school her big sister usually goes off to. Isn’t that right?”

So came a forceful nod.

“Hmm. Then where did Orino-san go? Her bag’s there, so she must have come, right? And why is Oshiri-chan wearing a baggy uniform? Don’t tell me that’s Orino-san’s uniform? Why?”

Going on and on, I asked everything that was bothering me. There, Kurisu-chan groped around at thin air as she put things in order and answered the question.

“T-the truth is, when we were playing, Orino-senpai, Oshiri-san and I, the three of us, a sudden gust blew in from the window and made off with all of Oshiri-san’s clothes...”

“The wind stole your clothes!?”

Just how fearsome of a sudden breeze is that? Even the north wind’s mad attack with all his pride on the line couldn’t remove the traveller’s coat.

“And so after dressing Oshiri-san up in all of her own clothes, Orino-san... raised a cry of war as she ran off somewhere naked to chase after Oshiri-san’s clothing.”

“Naked, raising a battle cry!?”

Is that what the kids are doing these days!?
Is that the newest health trend?
And isn’t Orino-san acting a bit too manly? She’s sacrificed her womanhood in exchange for manliness. When she’s being a good sister, I get the feeling she stepped off the path somewhere. The path of humankind.

‘K-Kurisu-chan!?’

‘I-I’m sorry! This is all I’m capable of!’

‘That last naked raising a war cry part was completely unnecessary, wasn’t it!?
Are you still holding a grudge over the other day!?’

‘..... No, not particularly.’

‘She was!’

Gazing at the two making strange eye contact again, I thought about Orino-san. Would she be alright? I hope her stomach doesn’t get too cold.

“Yeah. Well, I’ve got the gist of the situation. Meaning you have to wait until Orino-san gets Oshiri-chan’s clothes.”

“That’s right! Right, Kurisu-san?”

“Exactly. Right, Oshiri-san!”

The two smiled radiantly. I got the feeling they had both broken into a cold sweat, but well, that must be a trick of the light.

The three of us spent the school’s return time in leisure, but Orino-san didn’t return. It seemed that Kurisu-chan had some business to attend to, “I’m sorry, Orino-se—no, Oshiri-san. When the time comes around, I’m sure you’ll return to normal...” She gave an honest apology and left.

And so, until Orino-san returned, I would have to look after Oshiri-chan. “I’m fine on my own! I have to hide somewhere until the time hits—” or so Oshiri-chan said, but I couldn’t just leave a child this small be.

If I just left her unsupervised here, there’s no way I could look Orino-san in the face.

“Alright, Oshiri-chan. You have to do it just as I taught you.”

“Y-yes...”

She nodded with a conflicted face.

The location was my house’s living room. I couldn’t think of any better place after the school closed its doors, so for the time being, I took her home.

By the way, Oshiri-chan wasn’t wearing Orino-san’s baggy uniform, she wore a one thousand yen one piece bought on the way back. She used her own money to buy what seemed quite cute for the price tag. The reason the wallet I saw when she paid looked identical to Orino-san’s must be because they bought a set as sisters.

“H-here I go.”

Oshiri-chan’s entire body shook with shame and humiliation as she took on

the pose I taught her.

“K-kamehameha...”

She said weakly, thrusting both her hands out front.

“Wrooooong! No good at all, Oshiri-chan!”

After grandiose lament, I lectured her once more.

“Are you listening? First, your hands go like this. Like a cat’s paw. Bring them behind your body. There are a lot of people who remember it wrong, but you don’t put your hands together one over the other, it’s finger to finger, and wrist to wrist.”

Aided with a demonstration, I continued on with the easy to understand self-liberation.

“And at the end, like this! You forcefully push out your hands! At that moment, it’s not ‘Ha’, it’s more realistic to say ‘Haaaaa’!”

“.....”

“The moment you think it’s embarrassing is your loss. Secret techniques are born from throwing away one’s shame. No matter how embarrassed they are, everyone endures it and cries it out.”

“... What even is this game...”

Oshiri-chan was despondent.

Hmmm. Perhaps it wasn’t a fun way to play for a girl. Back when I was around seven, I was doing nothing but it.

Thinking back to my younger years, I gazed out into the distance, losing myself in thought.

“Once upon a time, I was always practicing it in Gentle Breeze Park.”

“... Ah, come to think of it, you were.”

“There was this one time I used my kamehameha to take down the monster attacking a lady in a strange suit.”

“His memories have been glorified!?”

“And then, the lady in the strange suit proposed to me, ‘Please marry me’ she said.”

“Wrong! It’s the other way around! The one proposed to was me! Why’s it

turned into what sounds like a little boy's fantasy!?"

"Ummm, and so, what was it again? When I asked, 'What part of me do you like?' the lady answered, 'Your huge something something,' so I said, 'I can't matty someone who says things like that,' and turned her down, I think?"

"I'm telling you, it's the opposite! What's more, your memory's hazy in the worst possible places!"

While Oshirchan raised a ruckus, I recollected once more, proper this time. There's no way I would forget it.

That was my... precious memory.

An out of breath Oshiri-chan said, "A-anyways," and backtracked to square one.

"Kagoshima-san. Practicing special moves is embarrassing, so I'm good..."
"... I see."

That's a bit depressing. Looks like I'm the only one who found it fun.

"I'm really sorry. I've never read Dragon Ball, so I just don't really get it."
"-!"

At that casual statement, I was unable to conceal my horror.
She's never read Dragon Ball?!

As if my angles had become sponge, my body turned unsteady. Unable to even stand, I collapsed onto the floor. I'm in despair. The darkness of despair devours me to the bone.

"W-what's wrong, Kagoshima-san?"

"... Oshiri-chan."

"Y-yes..."

"Isn't it about time you went home?"

"His treatment of me suddenly got cold!"

"No, I mean, I have absolutely no idea how to interact with a kid who's never read Dragon Ball."

"It's that big of a deal!?"

"... Is this the slackening of our education system?"

"No! The education system doesn't have that prejudice!"

"Oh? But Oshiri-chan, from time to time, you stop talking to me like I'm your senior."

“T-that’s... my usual habit...”

Oshiri-chan’s words clogged up.

To the cute little girl, I sent over some kind words.

“Kidding, kidding. It was a joke. You’re still only seven years old. It can’t be helped if there are some famed works you’ve yet to read, and of course, your word choice might get thrown out of order.”

As I said that, “Yes,” Oshiri-chan regained her bright smile.

“Ah, but if there was a girl out there who reached high school without reading Dragon Ball, they definitely wouldn’t be my type.”

“.....”

“That sort of girl is just out, out. Totally out of sight, out of mind. I can’t see it being any fun if I went out with a girl like that.”

“.....”

“Ah, come to think of it, has your big sis—”

“She said she read it! She’s a huge fan!”

Oshiri-chan bit on with fearsome momentum.

“R-really? I see.”

“Yes. The other day, I saw her secretly practicing kamehamema in her room!”

“In high school!?”

Even I graduated from that in elementary school.

Orino-san, seriously?

Looking down over my second-hand embarrassment, “When I get back to normal, I’ve got to read every volume,” Oshiri-chan muttered something incompressible.

“Then Oshiri-chan. Let’s stop practicing secret moves and play something else.”

“Yes. That sounds best.”

“Which means, what other great Dragon Ball Scene should we...”

“... No, I’d like to get away from that already.”

I raced my mind around a certain masterwork.

Off the top of my head, I could only think of, “His name was Krillin!” and

“Goodbye Tien.”

Ah, that’s right.

Since there are two of us, how about we do a fusion!

I’m sure it’ll be fun if we do that mysterious pose. Since our physiques are too different, I doubt we’ll succeed, but there’s still worth in trying.

“Hey, Oshiri-chan, won’t you—”

I was about to say, but noticed. That’s right. Oshiri-chan never read Dragon Ball, so there’s no way she could understand the jargon.

“Won’t I what?”

As she tilted her head with an innocent smile, I tried conveying it to her without using any specialized terminology.

“Won’t you become one with me?”

Her face turning as red as a boiled octopus, Oshiri-chan used strength unthinkable from a seven year old, no unthinkable for a human in general to perform a one-armed shoulder throw on me.

Hmm. So it’s possible for a human to sink into a sofa.

After that, we tried out various games, but it was a failure on the whole. Playing cannon shot with B-Daman, playing dragon loop with a hyper yoyo, playing magnum tornado on my mini 4wd, playing Shining Sword Breaker on my crush gear, playing vanishing attack with beyblades, playing charged particle cannon with zoids, playing true duelist in MTG (you know, where you overexaggerate lines like “I can hear it, the deck’s voice!”), but it was all no for naught.

“... Oshiri-chan, you’re a hard nut to crack.”

“No, the games you suggest are just heavily biased, Kagoshima-san. Please, a normal game if you will.”

“Hmm.”

I folded my arms, sat on the sofa, and kicked my feet, staring fixatedly at the

little girl.

“What do you normally play, anyways?”

“N-normally, is it? Umm...”

After mulling a moment over, “... What to kids of this generation usually play,” she quietly put the answer to mouth.

“P-playing doctor...?”

“.....”

I was at a loss for words.

Playing doctor.

I certainly got the feeling it was a standard among standards for children’s games, but between me and Oshiri-chan, would that be a bit of a felony? ... no, but Oshiri-chan finally said what she wanted to do. I’m not a man if I shoot her down here.

“Alright! Let’s do this doctor stuff.”

“Eeh!? Umm... I know I’m the one who said it, but are we really doing this?”

“No need to hold back, Oshiri-chan. Patient or doctor, which do you prefer?”

“... Then doctor... wait a second. We’re *really* doing this...?”

And so.

Embarrassed as I was, I thought I’d do my best, and for some reason, Oshiri-chan looked even more embarrassed than me. The doctor game began.

“Hey, Dr. Oshiri.”

“... I wonder why. When you call me doctor, I just get the feeling you’re mocking me... y-yees, what’s wrong?”

“My body’s not being holding up too well since yesterday...”

“You’ve got a cold. I’ll give you some pills, so just get some rest. Now take care.”

“Yes, thank you very much... wait, are you a quack!?”

I casually threw in a retort. I was in a strange mood, if I do say so myself, but if I don’t psyche myself up, I’d never be able to play doctor.

“That’s no good, Oshiri-chan. Your examination was way too care-free.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Try to be a bit firmer next time.”

“... Kagoshima-kun, aren’t you needlessly harsh when it comes to play...”

I got the feeling she mumbled something softly, but let’s forget about it and Take 2.

“Hey, hey, Dr. Oshiri.”

“Ah, so that part doesn’t change... Y-yeees.”

“My body hasn’t been feeling too good since yesterday.”

“Yes, then if you’ll excuse me,” There Oshiri-chan observed my body from head to toe. “Understood. This is... cancer. You require immediate hospitalization.”

“No way!? Doc, can’t you do something about it... wait, how in the...!?”

Time for another casual retort.

“You’re way too good at your job, Oshiri-chan... how can you tell it’s cancer just from looking? Even Clack Jack can’t do a CT Scan with his naked eyes.”

“That’s because the setting goes that I’m the best doctor in the world...”

Fidgetingly entwining her fingers, Oshiri-chan hung her head.

I’ve been thinking it for a while now, but it does seem that this child isn’t good at childish games. Does she usually not play too much?

“Anyways, Oshiri-chan, let’s try doing a little more normal doctor play.”

“I don’t really understand what you mean by normal.”

“Yeaah. In that case, how about we let me be the doctor next time? I’ll show you an example.”

At my proposal, Oshiri-chan gave a stiff nod.

“Fufufu. Then let my show you how the adults play doctor.”

“Wha!?”

As if seething over, her face flushed red.

“W-w-w-w-what are you talking about, Kagoshima-kun!? How the adults what!? P-pervert!”

“Wrong, wrong! I didn’t’ mean anything strange when I said it, settle down!”

I frantically soothed her as she chastised me in a tone reminiscent of Orinosan. I never thought she'd take the word adult like that.
Well, just like that.
Let the Kagoshima-school Adult Doctor Practice begin.

“.....”

“... Oh, am I supposed to start? D-Dr. Kagoshima...”

“... How much?”

“Eh?”

“I'm asking you how much you can pay.”

“Eeeh!? What's this development!?”

“A surgery is thirty million. I'm not striking it down a single penny.”

“So you asked how much I could pay when the price is already fixed!?”

“Hey hold it, doc! No matter how you cut it, that's too high!”

“Wait, who's this!?”

“Silence. An assistant like you has no say in this.”

“So it's an assistant... wait, what? You're playing two roles?”

“Ufufu. You never change, doctor. Haven't moved a step all those many years.”

“Another one! Someone that sounds like a female doctor just got added in.”

“... I'll pay! My dear son's surgery, thirty million yen, no matter how many years it takes, I'll definitely...”

“And something a mother would say!”

“No matter how many... rolls it takes.”

“A slot machine!? It was a no-good mother addicted to gambling!”

“Kukuku. Oy, what are you going to do about this? Your mother says she's going to pay for your operation. How bout it?”

“Eh? Ah, my turn!? I'm playing the son!?”

“What are you going to do, Oshiritarou?”

“And that's the name you give me!?”

“Lovely name you've got there, Oshiritarou. A name filled with a mother's wish for you to grow up strong like Momotarou, ain't it?”

“What an arbitrary origin story! Just because some people say peaches look like butts!?”

“The eyes of everyone present gathered on young Oshiritarou. But Oshiritarou had a reason he could never undergo the surgery. It happened when he was

only three.”

“The narration kicked in!”

“I am god.”

“!?”

“I will use my power to cure Oshiritarou’s ailment. Badabing badaboom. Yes, it is healed. And they all lived happily ever after.”

“God’s use of power is way too arbitrary! Rather, you just didn’t know how to wrap things up so you brought in god, didn’t you!”

Bullseye.

When I was happily playing dumb, I found even I had no idea where it was going, so I sought a lifeboat from the divine.

“By the way, when the contents of a story are all jumbled with no clear thread in sight, and god suddenly appears, ruining all plots and foreshadowing to that point, concluding the story, you call it Deus ex Machina. See, you did learn something Oshiri-chan.”

“... And that’s a wrap, is it?”

She said with a tired face and deep sigh. That was a truly tired sigh.

“I’m surprised you knew a hard word like Deus ex Machina.”

“Well that’s basic.”

“... Basic?”

Basic.

Every boy who’s experienced a certain specific period will have a needlessly in-depth knowledge on terms like Deus ex Machina, or Genesis, or Lucifer. Though I already graduated from that.

“Now then. How about you use that as reference, and try playing the doctor’s role again?”

“No, that didn’t serve as any reference at all...”

“Yeah, I guess...” I gave a bitter smile. “In that case, how about we just do the standard thing, and hit around a few places with the stethoscope?”

“Stethoscope... I see, I’ll do my best.”

She gripped her fist eagerly.

... Thinking about it with a level head, there was no need for her to get so hyped

over it, but, well... you lose if you take all of life with a level head. Playing along and effort is important.

And so, Take 3.

“Hey, Dr. Oshiri. My body’s not been feeling too good since yesterday.”
“Very well. Then I’ll try using my stethoscope, so please take off your shirt.”
“Eh?”

I froze up. “Ah...” Oshiri-chan stopped moving as well. It seems she understood what her statement meant.

I see, so I have to show my stomach for her to touch her stethoscope to it. Well, since we’re playing pretend, there might not be any need to do it for real, but I felt reluctant to pour water on Oshiri-chan’s long awaited hype. I resolved myself, and swiftly lifted up my shirt.

“Dr. Oshiri! If you will!”
“E-eeh? W-whoah... woah.”

Oshiri-chan’s face went red, she contained her mouth with both hands. She seemed to be flustered, yet her eyes traced lines down my exposed chest and abdomen. After remaining frozen stiff a few seconds, she eventually gulped down her spit.

“P-pppardon me...”

After giving a courteous curtsy, she began pretending to touch her stethoscope.

Rather than tapping, it felt more like she was patting against me. Gradually, the soft hands of a little girl touched my stomach and chest. Her body heat was directly conveyed to me.

Pat pat. Pat pat.

.....

I wonder what it is, this tickish feeling.

Strange. Since I was dealing with a small child, I thought I’d be able to keep calm no matter how much she touched me, but my heart ended up racing.

I mean, Oshiri-chan seemed super embarrassed herself. What’s more, perhaps she was showing restraint, as the way she touched me was overly soft. She touched me as if stroking me, and that only felt all the more ticklish, worsening

the strange feeling I got.

How strange.

Why do I feel as embarrassed as if I was being touched by a member of the opposite sex my own age?

“... It’s the first time I’ve ever touched a boy’s body like this...”

“I-I see.”

“Yeah...”

“.....”

“.....”

The conversation was over, silence descended. But it wasn’t a n awkward silence, if I had to stick a color on it... p-pink? That sort of silence, and the lack of awkwardness only made it all the more awkward.

At a set pace, Oshiri-chan touched my chest and stomach, even reaching her hands around to touch my back.

“Umm... Dr. Oshiri, how am I?”

“Y-yes. You’re more toned than I expected... it’s surprisingly nice to tough... it might even be a bit fun...”

“What? Ah, no, I was asking about my illness.”

“O-oh right! Yeah, yeahyeah, this is...”

Her words built up as if they had no idea where to turn, and in a matter-of-factly tone she went on.

“I-I won’t know unless I look into it a bit more.”

“.....”

So the doctor’s game was set to continue.

She continued patting me. I was laid out like a dead fish. Before I knew it, the stethoscope was gone, and she had completely switched over to palpation.

In the midst of it, Oshiri-chan suddenly stopped her hands, making a pensive face. “... Is this possibly my chance...? With my body like this... isn’t it fine no matter what I do...” she muttered something indiscernible, before looking at me with upturned eyes.

“Kagoshima-san...”

“W-what?”

“I-I-I’m seven years old. A child.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’m a child at an age where I still believe kids are brought in by the stork.”

If you actually say it, you don’t believe... I thought, but the current me hadn’t the leisure to think too deeply into it.

“S-so... I definitely don’t have any interest in a man’s body! I’m just putting my all into playing doctor!”

“Y-yeah, that’s what I thought...”

Oshiri-chan is still seven, after all. There’s no way she could understand something like that.

I kinda got the feeling she was sending lustful “... You know girls are interested in boys’ bodies too,” sort of eyes, but she’s still seven! There’s no way a kid this small would tell a lie!

“There.”

“Hyauh! W-wait, Oshiri-chan. Don’t grab my side like that.”

“Fufu, I’m sorry... fufu, but ‘Hyauh!’ he says... how interesting.”

“U-urgh...”

“There.”

“Hyahn! I’m telling you to cut it out, Oshiri-chan!”

“It’s not Oshiri-chan, it’s Dr. Oshiri, right?”

“...”

“You have to put up with it, even if it’s a little ticklish. This is an inspection.”

“U-u-urgh...”

She was completely taking the lead. Our positions had been reversed.

Kagoshima Akira, seventeen years of age.

At present, being bullied by a seven-year-old girl.

... What do I do, Oshiri-chan looks like she’s really enjoying herself. That’s the smile of a big sister who’s making a game of teasing her little brother. She was so up to it, it was as if she was getting back at me for my usual behavior.

No, it’s not like I’m not enjoying myself. More so, it’s a little... no, considerably fun.

But in this circumstance, is it really alright for me to have fun.

“Upsie daisy. Fufu.”

Raising such a cute voice, Oshiri-chan took her place on top of my lap.
Why was she getting on me!?
Oshiri-chan’s oshiri-chan is on my thighs!

“H-hey. Isn’t it about time we stopped playing doctor...?”
“You can’t. You have to listen to the doctor’s orders.”
“B... but...”
“Shh.”

Gently.
her index finger shut up my lips. With that action alone, I couldn’t move a single
muscle in my body. The body heat directly pressed on my abdomen, the body
heat across the cloth wrapping my thighs, added onto the moist eyes that
seemed to be peering up at me from below stole away my body’s freedom.
No.

No, no, no.
Why am I just letting her do as she pleases!?
Why is a seven-year-old leading me around by the nose!?
Seriously, a child’s innocence is scary.

But... this is bad. This is bad. This air flowing between the two of us is
exceedingly bad. Oshiri-chan’s eyes were like soft velvet, she was on the verge
of losing her rationality.

Ah, even so, she’s not a little sister for nothing, and this child’s identical to
Orino-san. Each and every part of her was identical (if I had to say, only her
chest wasn’t reminiscent).

I wonder if that’s why.
I got the feeling I was being played around with by Orino-san herself... as if the
usually prim and proper Orino-san was letting herself loose here alone, it gave a
peculiar jump to my heart rate.

Meaning, if I had to objectively analyze my current mental state...
I’m getting excited over being bullied by a little girl.

.....

I must apologize to you, father, mother... I wonder if this is how Dazai Osamu
felt when he penned No Longer Human. That’s definitely not it.

“When did this become a physical!?”

My retort fell on deaf ears as she tightly wrapped her hands around my chest. Is she supposed to be holding a tape measure in setting? I'm sure that's it. And if I had to sum it up shortly, it was a hug. My body was completely being embraced by a little girl, but as Oshiri-chan was seriously taking my chest measurements, it's no good to hold such impure thoughts. I must properly let myself be measured.

Still holding me, no... still pretending to measure me, Oshiri-chan didn't seem like she was going anywhere.

“Fu, fufu.”

It was a laughing voice of elation.

“Ufu. Ufufufufufu.”

It was a laughing voice imbued with madness.

[illegible]

O-Oshiri-san?

Isn't she kinda running out of control?

She's completely being swallowed up by the mood?

Isn't she taking this too far?

“O-Oshiri... chan.”

“Kagoshima-san...”

It seems the doctor came was gone. But I no longer had the leisure to care, all I could do was repeat a name without meaning.

“Oshiri-chan...”

“Kagoshima-kun...”

I was suddenly a cun. It was almost as if she had forgotten herself and reverted to what she felt was most natural, but no wasn't the time to think about that.

“Oshiri-chan, Oshiri-chan.”

“... No.”

Oshiri-chan gently shook her head, and gazed straight at me.

“Call me... Shiori.”

Why!?

Why do I have to call her by her sister’s name!?

I thought that question would be enough to fill my head, but I... the single man that is me, was swallowed in by the devilishness (?) of the little girl before my eyes, no longer able to carry out normal thought.

“Sh-sh-Shiori...”

... When I had never called her without an honorific, why was I able to say Orino-san’s name straight up to her little sister—or so I didn’t think!

“Y-yes, A-A-Akira...”

Why was she suddenly calling my first name— or so I didn’t care to know!

“... Shiori.”

“Akira...”

I no longer had the slightest idea what I was doing.

I presumed that’s how Oshiri-chan felt as well. Her eyes blank as a drunkard, her face was bright red. She made the expression of someone who had taken off for another world.

No—perhaps just before?

That other world—that new world was one she would set foot into now!

“Shiori!”

[IMAGE]

“Akira!”

“Shioriii!”

“Akiraaaa!”

Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep!

""GyaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAh!""

At the sudden synthetic sound of an alarm, we raised cries of shock, parting as if to thrust each other away. We got our disheveled appearance in order (The only one whose clothes were out of order was me), got our breathes in order, and calmed our pounding hearts.

“Hah, haha, hah.”

My head cooled, my sanity returned.

Aah, it's been a while, glad you're back, sanity. Did you go home for the weekend? And looks like you brought all your friends with you, Mr. Common Sense, Ethics, the Eyes of Society, and even the Law's been added to your party. The strongest party assimilated like slimes forming a king slime, becoming an enormous sense of self loathing and crushing me down.

...What was I doing? What was I trying to do? What was I trying to perpetuate with Orino-san's little sister...

An unending regret and guilt tore through my heart. If I had a katana here, I think I might unveil a display of traditional Japanese hara-kiri.

“What was I doing...”

Apparently, Oshiri-chan was fighting her self-loathing all the same. Her body prostrate on all fours, she mumbled her complaints at the floor.

“Playing doctor... what a dangerous game...!”

No, I don't think it's the game's faulty.

“U-um, Oshiri-chan?”

“Y-yesssss! A-aaah, umumum, p-please forget cleanly everything that just happened! There was something wrong with me!”

“No, that's what I'd like to plead, but that's not what I meant—”

I pointed at Orino-san's school bag Oshiri-chan had brought back with her.

“The phone's ringing.”

As I said that, Oshiri-chan's face went blank before she hurriedly took out the phone.

"Is that your big sister's?"

"Yea. Ah... I mean no! It's mine. I got mine as a set with my big sister's! So I'm going to answer"

Not waiting for a reply, Oshiri-chan left the living room with the cell phone pushed up against her ear. Even their phone are matching, what good sisters. But why was Oshiri-chan's cell phone in Orino-san's bag... ah, I see. She must have left it with the reliable Orino-san to look after it, I'm sure... as I thought over such trifling meaningless things, Oshiri-chan returned.

As if she had forgotten all of that messing around a moment ago—her face was serious.

"Kagoshima-san."

Oshiri-chan said.

She wore a mature air unthinkable of a girl of seven.

"Can we go play outside?"

The sun was already going down, so honestly, I didn't want to go outside, but Oshiri-chan said she had to go out no matter what, so I couldn't help but accompany her.

Reaching Asahi Park a bit of a walk from my house (no playground equipment, just a wooden table, bathroom and water fountain), Oshiri-san nervously looked around the area.

"Hey. Why did we come to this park?"

"T-that's because..."

Oshiri-chan grasped around for words.

"I apologize for calling you on such short notice."

A polite tone and bright voice reached my ear.

When I turned in the direction of the voice, a boy in glasses was walking towards us.

"Even so, that's quite the merry little thing you have going on there, Orino-

san. Ahaha, you're so cute you might awaken the lolicon in me. Out of affection, should I start calling you Lolino-san?"

"... Saijou-kun."

What leaked from her small lips was an uneasy voice. I had some recollection of the boy who suddenly appeared with the sociable smile.

"You're the guy who was searching for his glasses the other day..."
"Yes, you have my gratitude for that."

He gave a grin. The boy who smiled often was apparently called Saijou-kun.

"... Are you an acquaintance of Oshiri-chan?"
"Yes. I'm acquainted with this Oshiri-chan. Right, Oshiri-chan... pff. Oshiri, eh... Oshiri?"

As Saijou-kun spoke stifling his laughter, Oshiri-chan hung her head in shame, "My name doesn't matter," she drew close to him and whispered. "I brought Kagoshima-kun as you asked. In regards to this form, it's um, as we discussed on the phone..."

"I know. You were dragged into testing one of Professor Kuroigawa's new drugs again, right? Judging by the symptoms, you maintained your memory and knowledge while your muscle, skeletal mass, internal organs, and pretty much everything else regressed uniformly to an infantile state—something like that?"
"Y-yeah. And returning to normal will..."

Saijou-kun corrected the positioning of his glasses.

"Well—let's just leave it at that."
"Eh?"
"Good night."

Saijou-kun pushed against Oshiri-chan's forehead with the center of his index finger. With only that, the little girl's body crumbled down.

"O... Oshiri-chan!?"
"No need to worry. She's only asleep. Give her an hour, and she'll wake up."

He said indifferently as he held up a collapsing Oshiri-chan with both hands.

“... W-what did you do?”

“? I didn’t do a thing. I’m sure she was just so worn out from playing that she fell asleep. Kids her age are supposed to eat well, sleep well.”

He said, as if playing dumb he gave a light shrug of his shoulders. Looking at Oshiri-chan she seemed to be in a sound and comfortable sleep. I see, so she was just sleepy, I felt relieved. And I repented at having asked such a tactless question. What did you do? Of all things. It’s not like he’s a psychic, there’s no way he could put people to sleep at will.

“Now then. Kagoshima-san. If you’re fine with it, how about we have a little chat?”

Saijou Mutsuki.

That’s what he called himself.

I did have some familiarity with that name. Though I say that, I’d only heard his last. At times, Orino-san would bring up the name ‘Saijou-kun’.

He was a Telepathy Special, and one of the only four Rank S psychics in the organization. He was thirteen years old. Among the psychics at a level that could be thrown into real combat-Rank B and above-he was currently the youngest. His mental manipulation abilities ranked him top class in the organization... or so was the role he was supposed to play in that movie, and he was a part of the movie club, apparently.

Meaning he was Orino-san’s... comrade

“I’ve know Orino-san quite a while. So I’m on decent terms with her little sister Oshiri-chan as well.”

He lined up his words as if in song, as he rested his chin on his hands, and directed a soft gaze at Oshiri-chan leaning against me.

The wooden table and bench in the corner of the park. There, the three of us sat. Saijou-kun took his place across from me, while Oshiri-chan sounded a sleeper’s breath to my side.

“And so? What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Ah, right, right. Truth be told, I wanted to have a chat with you, man to man, for a while now. Did you know? You’ve become quite famous among our

ranks.”

I’m famous?

In the movie club Orino-san belongs to?

“Of course, only a certain portion actually pay any attention to you. Your fame’s on the level of a back alley diner only frequented by those in the know. Albeit, Kugayama-san... no, Kirako-san seems to view you as her sworn enemy. Well, let’s push that aside, much time’s a wasted to idle chatter, so let’s get into the main topic.”

Spoke Saijou-kun.

His sociable smile uncrumbling, in a truly cheerful tone.

“What did you do to Orino-san?”

It was so sudden, so abstract, I couldn’t even tilt my head; I simply froze in place. I could only weakly repeat the question.

“What...?”

“Orino-san’s gotten stronger lately. As if her recent stagnation had been a lie, at an impossible speed, she’s experiencing accelerated growth.”

“... What do you mean by that?”

To get stronger was such an ambiguous expression, I couldn’t understand his point. In a shonen manga, getting stronger would mean higher combat strength, but in reality, that’s not what strength meant.

There was strength in a fight, or mental strength, strength as a human, I’m sure there were various forms, but just which one was he pointing to?

“Should I spell it out even simpler? Orino-san’s abilities are rapidly rising. When she’s been stuck at Rank B for close to ten years— a great many people theorized she would spend the rest of her life at Rank B, they foresaw that her abilities would never rise again. And yet, just the other day, she auspiciously rose to Rank A.”

“.....”

“To give it to you straight, her pace is unnatural. If she keeps advancing at this

rate, she might eventually reach the same Rank S as me. When that happens, there's sure to be a wave of confusion and unease. Well, I'm a generous person, so I don't care about that, but a certain Utsurohara-san whose generosity and capabilities are the inverse of mine might try to hammer down what sticks out."

The inside of my head was filled with questions.
Ability? What's that? If Saijou-kun's a member of the movie club, then was he talking about acting ability?
And Rank? Was there a ranking system inside of the club?

"Hmm. So it's pointless even if I say that much."

As I remained only capable of silence, Saijou-kun breathed out a bored sigh.
"I'm here face to face talking to you... seeing all your feelings, thoughts, heart, and yet I can't see a thing. It's all so unclear, the point's not getting across. When I've given you so many hints, I thought your thoughts might show some sort of seam, but none of that either... honest to a fault, you believe in that whole movie story."

Closing his eyes, he ignored me and began talking to himself.
As if to say there was no merit in dealing with me.

"..... Yeaah. Maybe this was a miss. It wasn't this man... no, but you know..."

His monologue continued.
As I sat before him, a fear began to but in my chest.

"Pardon me."

Saijou-kun suddenly leaned forward and touched my forehead. I recalled how Kirako-san had done so a while ago.

"... Hhm. There really are no traces of memory or thought manipulation."

Returning his hand, he tapered his mouth in displeasure.

"Hey, what's your deal?"

When I asked without hesitation, "Ah, don't worry about it," he answered lightly. When I was supposed to be the elder, it was almost like I was being treated like a child, and a little unpleasant.
After letting his thoughts steep a while, Saijou-kun eventually raised his face. He

took off his glasses.

Without anything between us, he gazed straight into my eyes.

“I’m currently looking into the founder of our organization.”

“The founder?”

“Yes. Well, I’m just moving of my own accord. As things stand, it looks like I’m the only one holding questions on this organization’s start and its system.”

Organization.

Was he referring to the movie club? I get the feeling it didn’t really matter who set up a movie club and when, but apparently, this young boy cared deeply.

“Fufu. Yes, that’s right. I care very deeply.”

As if looking into my thoughts... or perhaps reading them, Saijou-kun said.

“I’m just no good with this sensation of, ‘not knowing’ you see. It’s my nature look into whatever I’m curious about.”

“I don’t get that feeling. When it comes to me, I’m the type who really isn’t bothered if what I don’t know remains unknown.”

“It must be a natural disposition. Or perhaps one’s true character. It looks like my way of thought and yours are different from the root.”

“Looks like it.”

“Getting back on track. I was looking into the founder... and I found you.”

“Me?”

I didn’t see the connection. Just what sort of connection could there be between the founder of the movie club and me?

“This isn’t like me at all; I’m acting on an intuition without any basis. While I continued my investigation, I started to see a thin thread between you and the founder. Kagoshima-san and the founder must be related in some way—I can’t help but get that feeling.”

“... I think that’s probably your imagination. I haven’t the slightest inkling.”

There Saijou-kun said, “You’re right about that,” with a small sigh.

“It seems you ‘really’ don’t have the slightest inkling, and that you really are just a civilian... well, that being the case,”

Your surroundings are a different story.

He said in a voice I could barely pick up, directing a glance at the sleeping Oshiri-chan.

“Magic, eh... looks like there are still plenty of things I don’t know in this world. I would never say something as arrogant as I want to know everything there is in the world, but at the very least, if I don’t know everything there is to know about the organization I’m a part of, I’ll keep getting up on the wrong side of the bed...”

With that declaration, Saijou-kun stood from his seat. He put on his glasses anew, and gave a bright grin.

“I must apologize for taking up your time. I’m happy we got to speak. Some other day, if the chance does arise.”

“... Saijou-kun.”

As he turned his back to me and walked off, I found myself asking. Something without much meaning, I simply felt an urge.

“Once you find this founder fellow—what do you want to do?”

“... I said it, didn’t I? I just want to know.”

Saijou-kun leisurely turned around.

“I simply can’t stand this feeling of being ruled by someone outside of my knowledge... this sensation of always tolling around on someone’s palm is just unbearable.”

He was still smiling as per usual, but in the depths of his eyes, something definitely was not. Those deep eyes that gave off a strength and resolve. Like the ones I admired in my youth, the heroes who would stand against an immense foe—

The bespectacled boy was gone.

Only me, and a sleeping Oshiri-chan remained.

“Saijou Mutsuki. So that man was the first to notice after all. I see he latched onto the slight seams that started to show with Masaki Souhei’s betrayal. The genius... Saijou Mutsuki. An exceedingly proficient power, and a clever head that falls not short of it. While putting on a flippant frivolous act, he conceals a

heated ambition. Fufu. How cute, his cuteness exceeds my expectations.”

A voice...

From nowhere in particular came a voice.

“If he wishes to reach me, then he’d best give it all he’s got. Of course, the way things are going, it will be nigh impossible. He cannot counteract 《Finishing Stroke》. Even if he can see through to the traces of memory and thought manipulation—he shall never know the traces of the world itself.”

A voice gentle and familiar to my ears sliced the surrounding stillness to bits.

“An amusing guppy; why don’t I let him swim a while? If he wishes to jump into the ring of fates of his own accord, I shan’t deny him. Just as he so desires, I’ll entangle him in a greater, greater story. It’s about time I stopped getting ‘pieces’ and started getting myself some ‘enemies’.”

To me, it could even be a lullaby, a voice that put my heart at ease.

“But Saijou Mutsuki. Are you aware? That curiosity shall kill that cat. The desire to know is born from the fears of the ignorant. It is nothing more than cowardice. To summarize, you are a human driven on by nothing but fear.”

But I couldn’t know the meaning put into what should be a familiar voice. I could tell it was saying something, but I couldn’t tell what it was saying. Even if it entered my ear, it didn’t enter my head. Even if it reached my body, it didn’t reach my heart. Someone able to talk in that special way, there was only one that I know.

“The truly strong... those to be feared are those who can accept ignorance in its entirety.”

Right, Akira?

And he appeared.

Before my eyes before I knew it... In the place Saijou-kun had been a moment ago, he sat.

As if that was an inevitability.

“Kai.”

I called out his name.

Shinose Kai.

Gray hair close to white, and a gray kinagashi close to black.

My childhood friend, from time to time, he would appear without any forewarning.

Deus ex Machina.

Much akin to the unreasonable, unfair god who enters the stage at the story's endgame—he appeared.

“Huh? You’re not surprised today.”

As he said that with a bitter and sweet smile, I replied in disappointment.

“I was a little surprised. But it was just a feeling... I got the feeling it was about time for Kai to appear.”

“... Hmm,” went Kai with a laugh. “To think you’ve got around to say something like that... I see. So Akira’s also changed in his own way.”

As always, he said something I could never tell was meaningful or not as he shifted his gaze to Oshiri-chan.

“Ah, this child’s Orino-san’s little sister. I introduced you before, right? One thing led to another and I’m looking after her, but it looks like she got tired and fell asleep.”

“I see,” Kai gave a quiet nod and narrowed his eyes.

I could see nostalgia and affection in his eyes.

Almost like a father who had pulled an old album off the shelf to look at her daughter when she was still young.

“From what I can see, she’s around seven.”

“Yeah. She said she was seven.”

“When it comes to Seven, when you met that lady in the strange suit, you were also seven, as I recall.”

“Yeah, come to think of it, you’re right.”

The events of ten years prior that shaped my personality.

That precious... precious memory.

“This must be some sort of destiny, Akira. The fates’ flightful fancy... no, what I feel is fate’s cynicism.”

“Surely you jest... it’s just a coincidence.”

“Perhaps.”

He said lightly and gave me a warm smile.

In contrast to Saijou-kun’s childish smile, Kai was making a mature one. Like the hazy moon that floated in a starless sky, his was full of a mysterious charm.

Ah, it really does calm the heart.

Talking to the members of the ComClub is really fun, but since I’m dealing with women, I end up putting on airs and sticking out my chest ever so slightly. In that regard, speaking to my male childhood friend Kai birthed no such necessity.

I could interact completely naturally.

I conceded my heart to him more than I ever had before.

“Master.”

There.

All of a sudden came the voice of a woman. Without any undulation of emotion, in a flat, even voice. The one there was a girl around the same age as me. Her pure-white hair left the strongest impression. The sort of white as if all the pigment had been drained away.

At a pace I could neither call fast or slow, she walked up to us.

“So this is where you were, master.”

Once she reached us, she spoke in a voice, still emotionless after all. It wasn’t only her voice that lacked emotion, but her expression as well. I couldn’t even hazard a guess as to what was going on in her head, it was an emotionless expressionlessness.

Like a machine. While that might be taken as rude, it’s what came to mind.

“What’s wrong?”

When Kai looked at her, he asked curtly.

“I have done everything you asked for without delay, so I have come to make a report. In regards to the plan brought up the other day, the spiritual

phenomenon around Mt. Osore has been properly quelled. Of course, as you indicated, without casualty to the surrounding villages.”

“I see. That’s nice. Good work.”

“Huh? You know her, Kai?”

I asked, and “Yeah. I’m somewhat acquainted with her,” he nodded.

“Then, um, master means you?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“... Why?”

“I’m into that sort of thing.”

Kai answered all too easily. There was really nothing I could say in response to that.

No, but... I’m feeling a bit conflicted.

“Looks like I didn’t understand the first thing about you, Kai...”

“Yeah. You actually hit the mark spot on with that line, but you’ve ruined it by in this situation.”

Can you save it for a bit later, he added on some incompressible words with a bitter smile.

Kai’s supposed acquaintance looked at me with her glass-ball-like inorganic eyes.

“You are Kagoshima Akira.”

“Ah... yes. I’m Akira-kun of the Kagoshima House. Umm, what’s your name?”

“My... name?”

She blankly tilted her head. As if she didn’t understand the point of the question.

I wonder why. Did I say something that displeased her?

“...”

Still silent, she turned her head to look at Kai. It looked like a gesture awaiting orders, while simultaneously a gesture seeking assistance.

“Aah, right a name...”

Kai shifted his gaze to the madder sky.

“Since I’m ‘World of Death’... let’s see, ‘Brought Back to Life’. How about Yomikaeri? Isn’t that right, Yomika Eri-san?”

“Yes. I am Yomika Eri.”

Said the girl... Yomika-san as she lowered her head towards me. I hurriedly lowered mine in return.

[IMAGE]

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Yomika-san.”

“Kagoshima Akira. I often hear about you from master.”

“From Kai?”

“Yes.”

Yomika-san went silent, staring fixatedly at me. It might be more accurate to say she observed me. It was a bit disconcerting to be glared at with those cold, inorganic eyes.

“I see... the more I look at you, the more contrastive you seem to master.”

Eventually, Yomika-san spoke.

“Shinose Kai and Kagoshima Akira...

Omniscient and almighty, therefore the existence must exist outside the world.

Ignorant and incompetent, therefore the existence can live at the center of the world.

The priestess(*kago*) caught in the cage(*Ori*).

The grace(*kago*) that surrounds the cage(*Ori*).

The understanding(*Kai*) that peers into the shoals of death.

The light(*Akira*) that holds the basket’s(*Kago*) death.

... He who admonishes(*Kai*) and he who gives up(*Akira*). Kagoshima Akira, your existence is...”

(TL: I highly apologize for how messy this looks, there is a high amount of

cryptic wordplay in this portion, so I just put some pronunciation in parenthesis)

“You’ve said too much, Yomika-san.”

Kai said flatly. When his voice was so quiet, it carried a strange intensity. “My apologies,” Yomika-san said with a deep bow of her head.

“But master. Please let me confirm one final thing. If this man is Kagoshima Akira—then the girl sleeping at his side is...”

“That’s right. No doubt it’s precisely what you’re thinking.”

“... That is the ‘Cage of Death Remnant’?”

She muttered in a low voice, directing a chilling glance to Oshiri-chan.

“You know Orino-san? But this kid isn’t Orino-san you know. This is her little sister Oshiri-chan.”

I explained, but Yomika-san completely ignored me and started at Oshiri-chan. She glared without a single blink.

I... grew frightful.

For when she hadn’t shown the slightest emotion to that point, a faint trace came into sight. What’s more, it was dark and black, it looked all muddled and messy. Why had she saved such eyes for Oshiri-chan?

“Ah...”

Looking between the two of them, I noticed a certain something. Yomika-san looked identical to Orino-san.

Her atmosphere was completely different, so I never noticed, but the more I looked at her, the closer she seemed. No, this wasn’t on the level of similarity. They were the same.

The same face, the same physique, the same voice.

But for some reason, I couldn’t think that Yomika-san was Orino-san’s twin or sister, or even a relative. She was definitely a complete stranger. And their resemblance must be by complete coincidence. I mean... they’re far too unsimilar. I can’t really put it into words, but this vague something, it included her atmosphere and bearing, or perhaps the portion you might even call her soul, Yomika-san was fundamentally different from Orino-san.

“Good grief. Thanks to Kurisu and Saijou, your long awaited emotional

confrontation's been wasted. When one side's sleeping and an infant to boot, it just doesn't make for the right picture."

Kai said with a bitter smile and stood from the bench.

"We should get going, Yomika-san."

"Yes."

As Kai called out, Yomika-san reverted to her original doll-like expressionlessness. And like a docile pet, or perhaps a well-made robot, she immediately drifted to Kai's side.

"Well then, Akira. The two of us are going to do some shopping and go home."

"Yeah. Got it."

"See'ya later."

"Buh bye."

Our parting complete, Kai walked off. Yomika-san silently followed three steps behind him. If I had to equate it to something, she was like an olden wife brimming with respect for her husband. As I mused and gazed at their backs,

"Ah, right, right,"

Kai turned around.

"This is something about a person with absolutely no relation to you, but..."

He gave as a preface and went on.

"That person met someone at a young age, and still blindly believed in their words to this day. For more than ten years, all the way. Only left with a faint memory of that person, but their words alone are carved deeply into his heart. Perhaps you should call it a curse, a binding mental chain continues to rule over his every action. Well, it might be easier to understand if you think of it as a form of mental trauma. Perhaps a phenomenon similar to what we refer to with animals as imprinting occurred."

But you see Akira, Kai said.

"No matter how you look at it, there should be a limit to that."

And bitter and sweet... he laughed.

“I mean, with something so insignificant... just because she asked him when he was a child, to think that alone would make him into a dense man who can’t notice anything, no matter how you look at it, don’t you think that’s far too convenient?”

“...?”

Just what could he be talking about? Who was he talking about? He started by saying it was irrelevant to me, so the only thing I’m sure of is that he’s not talking about me.

I couldn’t understand what Kai wanted to say.

The meaning embedded in his words...

I couldn’t tell... I couldn’t notice.

“When the day comes that you notice all the truths, will you be able to remain as you? I’m looking forward to see it just a bit. Just what sort of ending will the tale of the intertwining Cage and Basket reach...”

The sky was getting dark.

The afterglow of the setting sun dyed the world a final red.

But only around the man without any clear black or white, the world looked monochrome.

When I lost my words, Yomika-san leaked a slight mumble.

“... Master, are you not as guilty as me in saying too much?”

“Haha. You may be right. You got me there. When I’m dealing with Akira, it just throws off my groove.”

Bouncing a fun conversation.

Kai and Yomika-san.

Shinose Kai and Yomika Eri.

As if melting into the twilight. Faded away.

Oshiri-chan opened her eyes when I was carrying her over my back on the way home.

The sun had long since set. Relying on the streetlights that illuminated the night road here and there, I firmly supported up Oshiri-chan’s oshiri-chan with both hands as I walked on.

“Mnn...”

From my back came a cute voice. A breath hit against the base of my neck, a little ticklish at that.

“Ah, you’re up?”

“Eh... Eeh! W-why am I...”

“Oshiri-chan, you got tired and fell asleep.”

She was sound asleep, so I carried her piggyback.

“... Ah, I see, Saijou-kun’s that again. I let my guard down... U-um, I’m already up, so could you please put me down!?”

“Nah. It’s fine. Only a little left to my house, let me carry you.”

“B-but... I’m not heavy?”

“Not at all. Oshiri-chan, you’re light, so I’m fine. Well, if it were your sister, then given her physique, it would be a bit hard, considerably harsh to carry her for long periods of t—Gweh.”

Her arms wrapped around to strangle my neck. Did she get mad that I made fun of her big sister? What a loving little sister.

“U-um. In that case, I’ll take you up on that request.”

“Yeah... But I’d be thankful if you could wipe off the droop around my shoulders.”

“——-!”

My shoulders were strongly rubbed at. It felt like she was using my shirt to wipe it, but I was going to wash it later, so it really didn’t matter.

“I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Urgh...”

After groaning in a disappearing voice, Oshiri-chan limply entrusted her body weight to me. Thanks to that, she felt a bit lighter. It’s not like her actual weight changed, but when carrying someone, it gets a lot easier when you have a firm grip on them.

“... Kagoshima-san, you’ve got a big back.”

Quietly.
Oshiri-chan said.

“... It’s a whole lot bigger than I thought. You’ve got space from shoulder to shoulder, and it’s built sturdy... it’s far wider than my ow—I mean my sister’s back.”

“I mean, I’m a man after all.”

I know I shouldn’t be the one to say it, but even so, my physique should be better than Orino-san’s. But, well, in a fight or brute strength, or combat, or anything on that field, I got the feeling I’d never be able to beat her. Rather, I got the feeling I couldn’t beat Kagurai-senpai and Kikyoin-san, and for some reason even Kurisu-chan.

“Even I know I’ve got no real power, and I can’t do a thing...”

My back was surely never made big enough to shoulder the whole world. MY shoulders weren’t strong enough for the world’s fate to hand on. But, even so...

“I’m a man, so I think I at least want to be strong enough to carry a woman.”

I said to chastise-and boast-of myself.
I’m sure that’s about the most this back will carry.

“.....”

Softly.
Small arms wrapped around me.

“Thank you for playing with me today. It was really fun.”

Oshiri-chan said pensively.

“Eh? Realy?”

I couldn’t help but return the question.
I got the feeling I was arbitrarily playing on my own, while Oshiri-chan just looked on with a dubious face.

“Yes. I was able to learn what sort of things you played with when you were a kid. It was interesting.”

And Oshiri-chan's voice tone dropped.

"... I was never able to play normally, it was all fresh and fun... I never played with someone my age..."

"I see. Then that's good."

Sensing there was some sort of circumstance, I purposely didn't pursue her on it.

"Playing doctor was,"

"Let's forget that ever happened, Oshiri-chan."

"Yes. I've already forgotten all about it."

Our breaths as one, we formed a pact of secrecy.
A mysterious sense of unity.

"Umm, and so..."

After a deep breath, Oshiri-chan on my back cut in as if resolving herself

"Did Saijou-ku... Saijou-san say anything?"

"Mn? Aah, Saijou-kun."

I reflected on our conversation.
That boy was always giving a profound-looking smile. But everything he said was incomprehensible, and after that, with the impactful event of my encounter with Yomika Eri, I honestly didn't really remember.

"What was it again... as I recall... Orino-san's powers are growing... or something, I think he said something like that."

When I conveyed what I just barely remembered, the little girl on my back shut her mouth.

"I don't know what he means, but do you get it, Oshiri-chan?"

"... No. I don't know."

Hair brushed against my nape a few times. I'm sure she was shaking her head.

"But my big sis did say it. That her powers are growing stronger lately... yeah."

Said Oshiri-chan.
As if she was talking about herself.

She began to speak of Orino-san.

“Rather than the powers themselves growing stronger, as if they’ve begun to change into something else—they’ve begun to sublimate. That sort of feeling, it’s inside of me...”

Said Oshiri-chan.

“So I’m a little scared... is what my big sister said. She doesn’t know who she is, and she doesn’t know what she’s becoming.”

I silently listened in.
Because I didn’t know what to say.

“... Kagoshima-san.”

Oshiri-chan was lightly shaking. From my shoulders and back, I could sense the light tremors.

“Kagoshima-san, no matter who my big sister is, will you be her friend. Even if Orino Shiori stops being Orino Shiori, can you treat her as you always have?”

I was sure that was a serious question. So I gave it some serious thought. Such to remain oblivious, I thought with all I had. If I was the cool protagonist of some manga or anime, I would give a strong nod with no hesitation. That was the best, the most correct and most beautiful answer.

But I wasn’t the protagonist.
So even if it wasn’t right or beautiful... let it be honest and sincere.

“I don’t know.”

“.....”

“If Orino-san stops being Orino-san, I have no way of knowing what will happen then. I might come to hate her, and we might stop being friends.”

The slender hands reaching over my shoulders tightly gripped my shirt. I gently put my own hands over her shaking fingers, “But,” I said.

“If Orino-san stays Orino-san... if the most important part inside of Orino-san stays as it always has been, then I think I’ll always want to be with her.”

No matter who she may become.

As long as she stays herself.

“... Thank you.”

Almost in Orino-san’s own tone, Oshiri-chan said so.

“Kagoshima-san, you’re just the sort of person my sister said you were.”

“Eh? Did your big sis say something about me?”

“He’s a man who doesn’t understand anything... but what’s truly important, that alone he understands.”

That’s what my big sister said, went Oshiri-chan.
To me that was praise of the highest level.
The words I wanted to hear the most.

“Shucks...ahaha. You’re kinda making me blush.”

I suddenly grew embarrassed and ended up giving a bashful laugh.

“Yeah. I’m glad I heard it from you, Oshiri-chan. If I heard it from Orino-san upfront, I might be so happy I’d embrace her and kiss her on the spot.”

“E-eh!? I-in that case, the moment I return to normal...”

“Ah, but now that I’ve built up a resistance, I should be fine.”

“.....”

Oshiri-chan suddenly went silent. A deep sigh draped over the back of my head.

“U-u-umm... ii-in that case, Kagoshima-san.”

After a while, Oshiri-chan spoke terribly fumbly. She seemed to be extraordinarily nervous.

“W-what do you think about my big sister?”

“Eh? What do I think about her? In what way?”

“No, I mean, umm... do you like or hate her, that sort of thing...”

“Yes? Of course I like Orino-san. I love her I like her just as much as Kagurai-senpai, Kurisu-chan and Kikyouin-san.”

“..... U-urk...”

Oshiri-chan gave a glum moan, and began flailing her body. The kid finally started doing something childish.

“Not that, please not that...”

Sssss, haaaaa, after a deep breath, “Alright,” Oshiri-chan said strongly.

“Kagoshima Akira, what do you think of Orino Shiori as a member of the opposite sex?”

As a member of the opposite sex?

I was a bit taken aback. I never thought Oshiri-chan would say something like that. As a member of the opposite sex. Meaning, not do I like her as a friend of a comrade in arms, she’s asking about our so-called relation of man and woman.

Good grief. Elementary schoolers these days sure are mature, I thought but as I didn’t want to give a reply that was too arbitrary, I gave it some serious thought.

About my relationship with Orino-san.

I tried thinking... something felt off.

Two off feelings hit me.

The first was the sensation on my back. There were two soft sensations that hadn’t been there before. Extremely soft, the feeling off happiness. Come to think of it, I get the feeling I felt something similar when I carried Kagurai-senpai, but these were far larger and softer. Now that you mention it, Oshiri-chan’s still in elementary school, so I’m sure she doesn’t wear a bra. Not that that has anything to do with this.

The second was weight. I got the feeling Oshiri-chan was heavier than she was before. No, this wasn’t on the level of an inkling. She had certainly increased by at least a factor of five. The load on the hands holding up Oshiri-chan’s oshiri-chan had clearly multiplied. Rather, Oshiri-chan’s oshiri-chan had clearly grown.

“Kagoshima-san?”

Perhaps sensing my doubts, Oshiri-chan leaned her head over my shoulder. I turned my head... in shock.

Oshiri-chan wasn't Oshiri-chan anymore.

Oshiri-chan had... turned into Orino-san.

"A growth spurt!?"

For now I tried saying it, but there was no way. No possibility she was a changling either, which means...

"Eh? Growth spurt? What do you mean by that?"

"Wha, wha..."

With my shaking lips, I barely managed to string together words.

"What are you doing... Orino-san?"

".....Eh?"

Still being carried by me, Orino-san frantically looked all over her body. After a few seconds of painful silence...

"..... E-eeeeeeeeeh!? Why did it have to be now!?"

Orino-san raised a cry of surprise. But I was the surprised one.

"Why are you suddenly on my back!? And just where did Oshiri-chan go?"

"That's... a-anyways, it's embarrassing, so can you put me down!"

As if pushing me away, Orino-san fell off of my back.

I turned around, only to find my head in chaos again. Why. Why is it such a stream of dramatic developments?

"That outfit..."

For some reason, Orino-san was wearing something similar to Oshiri-chan. Clothing identical to that one thousand yen one piece dress that girl bought on the way home from school.

Confused as I was, I frantically put the pieces together.

Umm, as I recall, Orino-san was chasing after Oshiri-chan's clothing that was blown away by the wind, and she ran off naked. Meaning she grew cold and bought some clothing along the way. As sisters, it looks like they have a similar taste in clothing.

... I get the feeling my confusion's leading me to considerably strange conjecture, but, well, we can put the finer details to the side for now, and think about the biggest problem.

The biggest problem.

The fact that the one piece she bought as a set with her sister was visibly the wrong size.

"O-Orino-san..."

As a friend, I identified it out of kindness. It's no good if she hasn't noticed.

"It's about to burst."

Especially around the breasts. The one piece's chest portion looked like it would tear at any moment. It looked strained all over, stuck fast to her body. I think this sort of thing is called bodycon.

"... I'm aware."

Looks like she was aware. I continued pointing it out.

[AN IMAGE GOES HERE]

Also, if it was just a little shorter, I'd start seeing things.

It was a considerably daring mini skirt. If she just spread her legs a little, it looked like that alone would put everything on display.

"... I'm aware."

Orino-san hung her bright red face, as she quivered. Looks like I didn't have to point it out, she was conscious of it. Perhaps that's how she intended to pull it off in the first place. In that case, this is bad. Orino-san would look a hundred times better in some neat and tidy clothing.

Ah, I see.

I'm sure she's trying to be fashionable...

When a kid who's usually earnest suddenly tries going all out, does it lead to such an unfortunate result?

“Umm... Orino-san, I really think you’re better off quitting that style of fashion a bit lacking in shame. Something more traditional would—”

A blink of the eye.

In an instant, the distance between me and Orino-san shrunk to zero. I didn’t even see the afterimage.

Huh? But just now, from beneath the one piece, did I just see something I shouldn’t have... or so I thought, when I was pricked.

Specifically speaking, I didn’t know when or where. It was probably a human vital, likely somewhere around the meridian channel hidden points.

And there my consciousness cut off.

The next time I opened my eyes, for some reason, I was on the bed of my own room.

“... It was a dream the whole time?”

This is something of a continuation.

Even after the night had passed, my misgivings of it being a dream didn’t fade. Perhaps everything had been a dream.

Perhaps Orino-san didn’t even have a sister, could it be that Oshiri-chan was a fictional manifestation of the latent perverse desires hidden deep in my psyche. I want to play with a little girl, I want to be bullied by a little girl, born from my pedophilic desires, a product of delusion. The more I thought of it, the more I felt like crying.

“... I’m going to make Tezuka Osamu-sensei angry.”

Morning the next day.

Mulling over some misguided worries (Apparently, dream endings have been outlawed by the god of manga, Tezuka Osamu-sensei. Though there are various theories), I brought my heavy feet to school.

But my fears of a dream ending were soon cleanly wiped away.

As I attended school as per usual, I was swiftly apprehended and taken to the staff room.

Not knowing what was going on, I was surrounded by teachers with grim looks on their faces. One among them, the student councilor explained the situation

in a grim tone.

Last night, a neighborhood resident made a call to Adatara High School. According to them,

‘A male Adatara High School Student was leading around a female child, calling out indecent words like, “Oshiri-chan, Oshiri-chan”.’

Apparently.

... Why couldn't it have just been a dream.

Epilogue

“It’s been a while since we all got together.”

After school in the ComClub room, I looked around and muttered.
Today, everyone— Kurisu-chan, Kikyouin-san, Kagurai-senpai, and Orino-san—
were all present, leisurely sipping tea.

“You’re right. We’ve all been a bit busy lately, the timing never matched up.”
“We’re free to come or not if we want to, right? ‘n wait, that was the condition I
joined under.”

“You may say that, but you show up quite a lot, Kikyouin.”

“Mn... Well, despite this and that, it’s convenient and a pleasant place. You can
leave as much stuff as you want, and you even got a fridge when I wasn’t
looking.”

“... No, girl, that’s where you’re supposed to say, ‘I-it’s not like I wanted to see
you people or anything!’ you know.”

“... Yeah, yeah.”

“Kurisu-chan. Want another cup of tea?”

“Ah, I’ll take it. Thanks, Orino-senpai.”

And like that, the trifling conversation continued.
Boring and plain, it gave the feel the world was at peace... the time I liked most.
I was growing emotional as I sipped my tea when, “Come to think of it,”
Kagurai-senpai changed the topic.

“Only Kagoshima’s here overly often.”

“That’s right. I think he’s here every day.”

“Isn’t it because he’s got nothing better to do?” said Kikyouin-san.

“Yeah, well, since I’ve got time, I come to study.”

“Study? Ah, come to think of it, when I swapped out with Gakuta... is the new
ventriloquism act I was practicing, you were studying the whole time.”

“And when I was in the room, you came to study as well.”

Kagurai-senpai and Kikyouin-san said in wonder.

“Why is Kagoshima suddenly taking the straight and narrow?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

At Kagurai-senpai’s question, I offered a perfectly level answer.

“I mean, exams start tomorrow, right?”

“””” ””””

Four pairs of eyes gathered on me. Everyone blankly hung their mouth half open. After a few seconds of silence, our leader opened her mouth.

“K-K-Kagoshima. Is that... true?”

“Yes.

I was fact, so yet another level answer.

“Granted, club activities are prohibited right before the exams, but I consulted with our faculty advisor, and had them keep the club room open as a special exception. When I told them we were going to use it for study sessions, they happily gave the OK.”

“.....”

Silence fell unto the room once more.

But given the time,

“””””I forgooooottt!”””””

Everyone cried in unison.

“Why did you keep quiet about it!?”

“Eh? No, I thought everyone knew, and I was sure I didn’t need to go out oy my way to say it. And look, if you keep talking about tests, it just gets your more high-strung.”

“... You’re tactful in all the wrong places... what do we do, I thought I’d finally caught up to this school’s scope...”

Kikyoun-san held her head. Beside her, Kurisu-chan was clinging onto Orino-san.

“Orino-senpai! Please teach me again!”

“... Wait Kurisu-chan. I might not have the time this time around... I haven’t finished my own stuff at all yet...”

And Orino-san turned towards me.

“Kagoshima-kun, did you properly study?”

“Yeah. I did it proper this time around. I have more confidence than usual. But Orino-san, I don’t think you have to panic, won’t you be alright?”

“Right, but I don’t even know what the test will cover... and you’re confident, right Kagoshima-kun?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m cramming.”

“Why?”

“I kinda don’t want to lose to you in studies.”

She had a strange pride, apparently.

While the clubroom was up in a ruckus, the lone soul whose mouth remained shut suddenly stood. That individual was probably the one panicking the most at the moment. The greatest idiot of the ComClub.

“... I hereby announce the first official club activity of the ComClub.”

Kagurai-senpai made a needlessly grand declaration.

“From here on, we’re going to pull an all-nighter study session at Kagoshima’s House.”

The reason my house was selected was likely simply because it was closest to the school. Well, that being the case, it ended up that I invited four girls into the house. It might be a situation for a dance of mad delight, but as everyone was at their wit’s end, there was no time for joy, or pent up emotion.

“Yeaahh.”

In the kitchen, I turned my mind.

My room was a little narrow for five people at once, so the session was opened in the living room. Unlike our usual study sessions, no one had the time, so rather than teaching each other, it felt more like they were each persisting on

their own. Only when there was something they didn't know, would they ask someone who did.

I had relative leisure, rather, to be blunt, I had nothing left to do, so I went around to assisting everyone.

A few hours of stern studies, then came a short break.

While everyone was resting their exhausted bodies, I secretly headed to the kitchen. To make a midnight snack for everyone trying their best.

"Yeaahh."

I turned my mind further.

"Why is the pot empty?"

Strange things happen in the world.

In an attempt to make something light they could snack on and relieve their fatigue, I randomly shoved this and that in the pot, threw in that thing and even that thing as a secret ingredient, and finished it off with that, simmering it all on high heat.

Is it done yet? I thought as I opened the lid... only to find it empty. My cooking had completely vanished. What's more, for some reason, the pot was even cleaner than it was before I used it. I wonder what happened when it let off that Thud sound.

"Is this how the author of, Who Moved my Cheese felt?"

In that case, I might be able to become a best selling author myself. I see, so when your food suddenly disappears, you're filled with this sort of inexplicable feeling.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter."

I changed gears, and decided to brew some tea with tea bags. Orino-san taught me how to brew it tasty the other day, (Apparently, you're supposed to properly read the instructions on the box. I have seen the light), so I did just that.

Putting just enough cups on the tray, I returned to the living room.

"Do you want something to drink... wait."

I hurriedly quieted down. Gazing over the scene that expanded before my

eyes, I let out a light sigh. The four of them were soundly asleep. Kurisu-chan and Kikyouin-san and Kagurai-senpai and Orino-san. Leaned over the table, they let out quiet breath.

“... So they fell asleep.”

My smile naturally formed.

As I watched the sleeping faces of the sound-looking four, that alone brought peace to my heart.

They all must have been tired.

With all their own circumstance as of late, it looks like they've been dealing with a lot. And with things solved to a certain extent, they were letting loose just a bit.

It looks like everyone was working hard where I wasn't looking.

“.....”

After leaving the tea in the kitchen, I brought enough blankets down from the second floor.

I thought I might wake them, but before four cute sleeping faces, I was unable to do something so uncouth.

I gently draped the covers over the four worn-out sleepers.

And I said this.

“Good work.”

...Eh, the test?

Of course, all five of us slept in, missed it, and had to take supplementary lessons together.

Postscript

If I had to say, this time was a collection of backstage short stories that weren't supposed to be written about. Even as the protagonist is engaged in a battle with the last boss, their life on the line, the sub characters who don't know the protagonist's battle just normally enjoy their date to day life.

In this volume, each of the heroine's fights a different enemy.

Each and every one of them experienced a grand battle I could write an entire volume on, but unfortunately, these stories have been cut to save time.

Oh, how unfortunate (lol).

Meaning since the heroines are a little tired from their

life-or-death battle, they try to rest in their daily life part with the main character, only to get even more tired. Is the

story.

With this and that, it's been a while. This is Nozomi Kota.

My pen raced quite a bit this time around, or rather my pen was on a rampage, or rather, anyways, I enjoyed writing this. I'm

satisfied that I finally able to let a certain character who was mentioned in name along in chapter one have an appearance.

Well then, my thanks to those below.

My editor. You always look after me. I go off on a tangent whenever you leave me be, so I'm counting on you to lead me on the right path.

Takatsuki Ichi-sama. Thank you for the wonderful illustration once again. I love all the characters and heroines.

And all you readers who accompanied me to volume three. You have my honest gratitude. If it works out, I hope you'll bear with me from hereon as well.

Finally, here's a preview of what's to come.

This time was considerably gag-ridden, so next time is going to be just a little serious. To be more specific, a certain heroine enters the bath with the main character.

Well then, if the chance arises, let us meet again.

-Nozomi Kota